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Choices in “Super 88”

In this ethnography paper, I am going to write about the choices of western people in the Asian food place, and I chose Super 88 as the observation place for my study. The main focus of my ethnography paper is to demonstrate the consuming choices that westerners make and explore the reasons behind it. Since Asian food is becoming more and more popular in America, we could usually see western customers in Asian food restaurants and supermarkets. However, for what reasons westerners are coming to these places and what kind of things they usually consume interest me.

“Super 88” is a typical Asian place which combines a food court and a supermarket together. It is located to the west of BU campus. The food court is a rectangular area with various types of Asian food stores in the middle and tables and chairs (eating area) around the stores. The eating area is open to all customers. There are Chinese food, Korean food, Thai food, Indian food, Vietnamese food and milk tea served in the court. People could either take away or eat there. The supermarket sells a lot of Asian products. Most are from China and Japan. The rest of the products are mainly from Korea, Thailand, Malaysia and India. The supermarket opens daily at 8 am to 10 pm, whereas the food court opens at about 11 am and each food store has its own operating time. One Korean food store even doesn’t open on Mondays. Both the food court and the supermarket have their busiest time during 6 pm to 8 pm every day; however, they are less busy during midday time period, especially on weekdays.

In order to observe more thoroughly, I went to “Super 88” on weekdays as well as at weekends. I found that there were few western customers buying groceries in the supermarket, but there were quite a lot westerners eating in the food court. I wondered why westerners seldom buy things in the supermarket, so I asked a lady who had just finished ordering and was waiting for her “Bibimbap”. I started with the question about whether she had bought anything in the supermarket, and she answered, “yes, but not often.” Then, I asked her what kind of products she had consumed before. She said, “I had bought some frozen dumplings and tofu before, but I failed to cook them well and they didn’t taste good so that I would never buy again.” “Have you ever bought other food like vegetables or meat in this supermarket? ” “ No, never.” She answered, “ I always get fruit, vegetables and meat in star markets since those are much fresher and cleaner, at least looks better.” From the conversation with this lady, I could know that the reasons for westerners not going to the Hongkong Supermarket. First, they are not good at cooking Chinese food, so if they want to eat Chinese food, it’s better for them to consume outside. Second, the fruit, vegetables and meat are not fresh or clean enough in the Hongkong Supermarket, and westerners prefer those prewashed vegetables because they can eat directly without washing again. This is more convenient for them.

Now I had the explanations for why westerners didn’t choose to consume in the supermarket, but the question of “why do they choose to eat in the food court?” still remained unsolved. Does the first reason for not shopping in the supermarket also work for their choice of eating in the food court? I kept questioned western people, and I got several different answers. A boy, who came to the food court with his friend, answered, “One Asian friend of mine recommended this pho place for me, and she said it’s worth trying so that’s why I come with my friend. Actually, I seldom get Asian food.” Then, I asked an old American couple, and they replied that they were big fans of the Korean food, especially the “hot tofu soup” and the “bibimbap”, but they cannot make these dishes at home, so they chose to eat here. Another reason for eating here instead of other Korean restaurants is that “Super 88” is the closest place to their home for Korean food. A man (probably about forty years old) said that he really likes Chinese food, especially the Cantonese style such as dim sum; however, the dim sum places in Chinatown usually need a long wait and in “Super 88”, he can always get his meal within fifteen minutes after ordering. Thus, from these replies, I could conclude that westerners choose to eat in “Super 88” mainly because of three reasons: First, food is tasty and highly recommended by their friends, so they would like to have a try. Second, some people really like the Asian food but cannot make by themselves; therefore, they choose to consume here. Third, the food court is close to their home and fast in serving food.

While I was observing in the food court, I recognized that the food choices of westerners are quite different to Asians, but are quite similar within western group, so the question “Why do they choose this dish instead of the other one? “ interests me. I walked around the food court, and looked at the dishes that westerners had ordered. Most westerners who consumed in Viet Pho (Vietnamese food store) chose the pho and the Vietnamese sandwich. Westerners in Korean food area usually got the bibimbap, hot tofu soup or Korean fried chicken. Those who chose Chinese food for dinner ordered “general Gao’s chicken”(pretty much like orange chicken in Panda Express) and “chow mein”. I realized that their food choices could actually be categorized into two types: one is the most popular (or well-known) dish and another one is a kind of dish which mixes Asian style and American style together, for example, the “general Gsao’s chicken”. (Chinese people seldom eat general Gsao’s chicken, and this dish cannot be found in a real Chinese restaurant in China.) I asked a man who was having the “general Gsao’s chicken” for the reason why he ordered this dish and whether he order it every time when he ate here. He answered, “This dish tastes delicious and I always get this.” “Is it because of the chicken has already been deep fried?” I kept asking. “Not really, I like it because of the taste, a little spicy and sweet.” I also got other answers like “everyone ordered this”, “ my friend recommend this” and “ it’s similar to American food but with a different taste.” Hence, I think Americans may have no ideas about what kind food they should have when they come to this Asian place for the first time, so they just look at what other people get, and order the most popular one, or they just order the one that recommended by their friends. Once they think that dish tastes good, they would probably stick to this dish and would not try another one. Sometimes they order food according to the similarity to the food they consumes every other day.

Most western people come to “Super 88” for the food court instead of the supermarket. The reasons for not consuming in the supermarket are quite simple while the reasons for eating in the food court are various. The food choices of westerners are pretty conventional. I think it’s better for them to try some new dishes since Asian food contains the largest categories of food in the world. Although some are cooked in American style in order to fit American people’s taste, there are still some real Asian dishes served in the food court. If western people are more adventurous about the Asian food, they can definitely explore something more delicious.