Xuandan Zhang

Professor Kim

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Cross-cultural Phenomenon in “Super 88”

In this ethnography paper I am going to write about the cross-cultural phenomenon in nowadays society, and I chose “Super 88” as the observation place for my study. The main focus of my ethnography paper is to demonstrate the differences and the similarities of the food choices and behaviors of people with various culture backgrounds. Since the technologies (including internet, transportations and so on) for the communications between different countries develop so fast, interactions between people of different nationalities are more frequent and varieties of cultures start to appear in one nation. Considering United States as an example, there are increasing numbers of international students and immigrants coming to this country for education and unexpected lives. Chinese, Koreans, Mexicans, Portuguese…everyone has his (or her) own cultural background and brings those distinctive cultures together so that people in this society are experiencing the cross-cultural influences to some degree. The most obvious effect in our daily life is on the food aspect. As I have observed in “Super 88”, more and more westerners have preferences to Asian food and Asians start to try all types of Asian food rather than being stick to the food styles of their countries, whereas western people have slightly different food choices and behaviors from Asians in the food court of “Super 88”.

“Super 88” is a place which combines a food court and a supermarket together. It is located to the west of BU campus. There are lots of apartments and houses around that area. People who live in that neighborhood might be the main source of the costumers. My observation focuses on the food court part because the customers in the food court are more diverse than those in the supermarket. 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. No matter which food store people consume, or even they don’t buy anything in the food court, they can sit in that area. There are Chinese food, Korean food, Thai food, Indian food, Vietnamese food and milk tea served in the court. Comparing to other types of food stores, Chinese food stores occupy the most space since three different kinds of Chinese food are served there---Cantonese, Sichuan and Dim Sum. Then come the Korean food stores, which contain two parts. One is called Misono Wok and another one is called Misono Grill. Other food stores each owns a quite small space with a kitchen in the back and a counter facing towards eating area.

I went to “Super 88” food court for four times. In order to observe more thoroughly, I distributed my visits twice during weekdays and twice during weekends (one at noon and one in the evening for both weekdays and weekends). I found that the stores usually have their busiest time in the evenings of weekends, and there are fewest people at noon of weekdays. The numbers of people seem to be the same during the weekday evenings and the weekend noon. Furthermore, I observed that it’s hard to see westerners having lunch there during weekdays. Instead, they come in the evenings or during weekends (for either lunch or dinner). By contrast, Asians can be found there at any time in a day. Students and professionals are two main types of people who consume food there. I feel that there are more students than professionals in the food court at night, and the distribution between these two populations are kind of half and half at noon in weekdays. It’s difficult to tell whether the person is a student or a professional during weekends since most of them dress casually and without a typical symbol on them, such as a schoolbag. There are also some elder Asian people who do not need to work as well as living in this area sitting at the table, reading newspaper or eating food leisurely.

While I was waiting for my meal from the “Dim Sum Chef”, I asked the staff who is in charge of taking orders and giving food to customers, at the counter, “what kind of people usually buy food here?”(In Cantonese) He said, “All kinds, since there are all kinds of people working and living around here.” Then I asked him whether dim sum is popular among Americans. (Here Americans refer to western people.) He answered, “Of course, especially these types.” He pointed the pictures of BBQ pork bun, steamed shrimp dumplings and Shiu Mai on the menu to me. From his reply, I could know that Dim sum has already become an international food liked by both Asians and westerners. However, westerners tend to order some dishes that are well known by many people and are the most typical kinds of dim sum, while Asians (especially Chinese people or to be more specific, that is Cantonese) usually order some dishes which are traditional but not as famous as those chosen by westerners, for example, sticky rice in lotus leaf and rice noodle roll with fried dough. After finishing my meal, I walked around to see what kind of food people had ordered in other food stores. I found that Pho Viet (the Vietnamese food store) is so popular that the tables in front of that store are almost full. Asians like their pho and (rice) spring rolls best, while westerners liked the Vietnamese style sandwich and deep-fried spring rolls more, but still some of them ordered the pho. Korean food might be the third large category of food style that westerners are interested in. Most westerners chose the most traditional dish “Bibimbap” or the hot tofu pot. Nevertheless, Koreans and some Chinese people ordered the Korean noodle (There’s a kind of dark black sauce on the noodle.) and Korean seaweed rice roll. (This is my translation.) In conclusion, both Asians and westerners are trying food different from their “home food”, however, westerners choose the most well-known dishes from each food style to consume or the one which is similar to the food from his or her cultures, for instance, the Vietnamese sandwich (looks like sandwiches from “Subway”) while Asians are more interested in the traditional ones.

Westerners not only have different food choices from Asians, but their behaviors are not similar in several ways as well. The first one is about tips. There are small buckets for tips on every counter of the food store. I recognized that Asian people seldom gave tips to the food stores, but some westerners did, especially professionals and elder people. They gave out one or two dollars depending on how much food they consumed. Secondly, I found that Asian people can either eat alone, or have a party of two, three or four (at most), or order to go, however, westerners often came in with one or two friends (at most), and seldom took out. Asian people seemed to talk more with their friends when they were having meals than westerners did. Westerners liked to talk about how the food tastes while Asian people just liked talking about the things happened to them or their relationships with another person. Thirdly, although Asian food is more and more prevalent, westerners still cannot grasp the techniques of using the chopsticks so majority of them still using the plastic spoons or folks for the meals, even though some westerners could use chopsticks very skillfully, but still in a small portion. Asians use wooden chopsticks and plastic spoons mostly. After they finishing their meal, both Asians and westerners cleaned up the table, threw the rubbish away and gave the tray back to the staff.

Overall, from my observation, I can conclude that cross-cultural phenomenon is apparent in our daily life. People of various nationalities begin to try something unfamiliar and different from what they have in their countries and form some new preferences. However, under the big cross-cultural influences, westerners still have some behaviors and considerations on food choices that differ from those of Easterners. These things are probably already shaped early and cannot be changed easily because of their culture backgrounds. This is also true for Easterners so that although we take part in the cross-cultural influences, we still have our own identities rather than all the cultures amalgamating in the end.