Cultural Customs and Hot Pot: A Case Study of One Sri Lankan Student’s Manner at the Party

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Abstract
All individuals must eat in order to survive but what people eat, when they eat, and the manners in which they eat are all patterned by culture. Thus, the author tries to take this story as a case, examines the different cultural influence on the different peoples’ daily life, analyzes the importance of cultural customs in intercultural adaptation. Finally, the author gives some suggestions about how to strengthen the cultivation of intercultural communication awareness and intercultural communication competence, in order to adapt to a new cultural custom and a new culture and delegate the unnecessary misunderstanding and wrong behavior in intercultural communication.

Keywords
cultural custom, hot pot, intercultural communication, intercultural adaptation, Sri Lanka culture, Chinese culture

1. Introduction
All individuals must eat in order to survive but what people eat, when they eat, and the manners in which they eat are all patterned by culture (Xu, 2012). Also, every culture has its ways of doing things in daily life, such as ways of eating drinking, dressing and so on. Especially, Chinese people value eating very much, and there is an old but still – being - quoted saying – Food is the first necessity of human being in Chinese culture. It is said that there are about 8000 dishes throughout China. Chinese food is famous for its variety and abundance. One of the Chinese famous main eight cuisine is Sichuan food. Sichuan food contains lots of seasonings and is bitter, spicy and hot. Sichuan cooking is different from other cooking in China.

One of them is Sichuan hot pot, which can be a proof of its history of at least 1700 years. Today Sichuan hot pots have been increased in category to include the “Red Pot” (Spicy hot pot flavor with beans and lobster sauce being basal materials), the “White Pot” (seafood hot pot flavor with bone broth) and “Double Pot”. Moreover, more and more contents are included in the hot pot, or we may say, we can put almost everything edible into it. The Chinese people, specially, the young people like to eat hot pot very much. My son likes hot pot very much. In
America, my son is studying there and often invites his friends and classmates to gather together for hot pot.

Once, my son told me the story which happened with his classmate who came from Sri Lanka. The story gave me deep impression. Maybe, the story will show us how to adapt to a new culture and its cultural customs, so as to make better intercultural communication. Thus, the author tries to take this story as a case, examines the different cultural influence on the different peoples’ daily life, analyzes the importance of cultural customs in intercultural adaptation. Finally, the author gives some suggestions about how to strengthen the cultivation of intercultural communication awareness and intercultural communication competence, in order to adapt to a new cultural custom and a new culture and delegate the unnecessary misunderstanding and wrong behavior in intercultural communication.

2. A Case

One evening, my son invited his friends and classmates to attend the party at his house in the United States of America. The attendants were from China, France, Sri Lanka, Egypt, and America. They came to my son’s house in time and were very eager to taste Chinese food. My son wanted to show his cooking skill and to make his friends and classmates taste special Chinese food. He prepared Sichuan hot pot well and hoped his friends and classmates would enjoy real Chinese food.

At my son’s kitchen, in the center of the table stands a tall polished copper chafing dish, surrounded by a dozen plates of different meat and vegetables and a tray of different ingredients for the sauce. The meat has mutton, beef, pig and chicken. The sauces include: fermented beans, sesame paste, chili oil, shrimp sauce, chopped chives, sesame oil, soy sauce, vinegar, salt, glutinous rice wine, pickled vegetable, pepper, mixed together, often with the addition of fresh soup, the flavors harmonize surprisingly well.

When my son’s friends and classmates saw the hot pot, every one was in high spirit and so excited to eat the food in the hot pot at once. First of all, my son should show how to use Chinese chopsticks to his foreign friends and classmates. At this time, one friend from Sri Lanka said to my son and other friends like this:

“It is not easy for me to use Chinese chopsticks. I’ll use my fingers to eat food in the hot pot.”

My son and other friends hardly believed their ears and surprised at her saying with opening more their eyes and did not know how to give her an answer. My son and other friend thought she could use her fingers to eat food in the hot pot. Maybe, she might have a special power or magical skill. After a while, my son had to say to her, “Ok, as you like.”
The meat and other vegetables were being cooked at the table by dipping it a piece at a time into the water in the chafing dish, and then clipping it a second time into bowl in which the sauce had been mixed. After a while, the water in the hot pot was boiled and the food was cooked well.

At the that time, my son with smile said to his friends and classmates: "Now, the food in the hot pot is ready for your enjoyment. Almost every one of my son's friends and classmates except the friend from Sri Lanka did hurriedly use their chopsticks to find their own favorite food in the hot pot.

At the same time, every one wondered at their friend from Sri Lanka and saw how she could use her fingers to eat food in the hot pot. However, when my son's classmate from Sri Lanka saw the boiled water in the hot pot, she dared not use her fingers of her right hand to grasp food in the hot pot. Meanwhile, my son and other friends and classmates burst into laughter. Suddenly she flushed on her face for her misunderstanding how to eat food in the hot pot.

3. Analysis and suggestions

Globalization enters a world in which people of different cultural backgrounds increasingly come to depend on one another. To understand and accept cultural differences becomes imperative to be effective in intercultural communication in global society (Chen, 2010). From the above case, people can easily see that my son and his classmate from Sri Lanka both did not understand other cultural features including cuisine cultures, so as to cause a little cultural conflict in eating Chinese food of the hot pot. The case gives us a good lesson. Every culture has its own ways of doing things in daily life including eating, drinking etc. Maybe, some people feel in their hearts that the way that they do things is the only right way to do them. Other people's cultures often make as laugh or feel disgusted or shocked. Now, it is necessary for us to analyze the case from a perspective of intercultural communication. Firstly, we should know some differences between Chinese culture and Sri Lankan culture, and then discusses about how to avoid misunderstanding different cultures and their cultural customs involving behaviors and ways of doing things in daily life. Finally, the author will give some suggestions about how to improve intercultural communication competence and to adapt to a new cultural customs and a new culture.

3.1 Different cultural characteristics and their own unique cuisine cultures

China and Sri Lanka are both civilized ancient countries and have different histories, cultures including cuisine cultures and table manners. Only can we know some knowledge about the two countries' cultures and cultural customs
including table manner, we may quite well understand their people and different behaviors and ways of doing thing in daily life, and will learn the real reason why the case happened. It is fundamental for us to further discuss about the case.

### 3.1.1 Traits of Sri Lankan culture and table manner

Sri Lanka is an “island country in the Indian Ocean, separated from the southeastern coast of peninsular India by Palk Strait” (Safra & Aguilar-Cauz, 2005), Culture of Sri Lanka is very unique like its beautiful places, ancient ruins, weather conditions, etc. Though the culture of Sri Lanka society is more than 2500 years old, it is really Buddhism that was the most influential civilizing force of the country. People got delimited ideas about what is right and wrong, beneficial results of good deeds in this life itself and vice versa. Lives of the Buddha and his noble disciples had a good impact on the people. People were taught to be sincere, kind, truthful, harmless and to help the downtrodden, etc. (Culture of Sri Lanka, 2014)

Sri Lankan food consists out of a large variety of vegetables, sea food and all sorts of tasty meals. Rice and curry is certainly the No.1. The traditional way to eat rice and curry is to use the fingers of the right hand to shape little portions of the rice and curry into small balls that can be easily popped into the mouth. It is believed that a Sri Lankan meal tastes better when the diner uses the fingers instead of a fork and spoon. Eating with the fingers is not messy if managed correctly. Properly handled, the food should touch only the fingertips and not get stuck on the lips or beard.

Sri Lankan people say that using their fingers is better for “mixing” the food as well as they refer to their long tradition saying that the taste is much better when avoiding cutlery (Food in Sri Lanka, 2014).

### 3.1.2 Traits of Chinese culture and table manners

China has a long history. It is a multi-ethnic nation with the world’s largest population. Of the four oldest recorded civilizations in the world, the Chinese civilization is the only one that has an uninterrupted history. For many centuries, her people have been farming and living on the vast land, creating and developing her unique culture (Liao, 2008).

Chinese food is known for its variety and abundance. According to data on the subject, the number of well-known ancient and modern Chinese dishes amounts to 8000. The ingredients may be roughly classified into 600 categories. There are 48 different basic ways of cooking, including roasting, frying and boiling, all of which bring out the best of the ingredients. Besides, Chinese cooking lays emphasis on the three essentials: color, flavor and taste, and thus every dish on the Chinese meal table looks like a piece of art, good-looking and delicious. China
is a vast country. Each area has a wealth of local specialities in its cooking. This means that the range of ingredients and cooking styles is incredibly wide and varied (Zhou, 2010).

Chinese people like to use chopsticks to eat food. Chopsticks are the simplest possible tool for conveying bite-sized morsels of food from a plate or cooking vessel to the mouth. The coordination required to master his survival tool gives a child an opportunity to prove to his elders that he or she is no longer dependent on the spoon, and can reach out for his or her own food like everyone else (Gong, 1986).

Chinese people choose chopsticks as their tableware rather than knives and forks since Confucianism consider a knife and fork a sort of violence, resembling cold weapons. On the contrary, chopsticks reflect gentleness and kindness, the main moral teachings of Confucianism (Xu, 2007).

3.2 Suggestions

All human beings have certain basic needs, such as eating, drinking, keeping warm and dry, and so on. However, the way in which they take care of their needs depends on the culture in which they grow up. All cultures have ways of eating, dressing, finding shelter, marrying, and dealing with death. The food that we think are good to eat, the kind of clothes we wear, and how many people we can marry at one time are all parts of our culture (Zhang, 2012).

Especially, our own culture seems very natural to us. We feel in our hearts that the way that we do things is the only right way to do them. Other people's culture often makes us laugh or feels disgusted or shocked. Therefore, communicating with people from different countries can be fascinating precisely because of different cultures. Yet such different cultures can all too easily give rise to misunderstandings.

Needless to say, intercultural communication settings, it is all too easy to become trapped by invisible walls or barriers to communication. Although those walls are hard to perceive, they are not imaginary. The only way to “escape” is to learn to see them and avoid making the communication mistakes that come from them (Cao, 2011). Hence the author tries to discuss how to improve intercultural communication competence, so as to adapt to a new food culture from the several following aspects.

3.2.1 Cultivation of intercultural communication competence

As we know, communication, language and culture cannot be separated. Successfully intercultural communication demands cultural fluency as well as linguistic fluency. If we are to communicate effectively in English, we need more than just competence in English grammar and vocabulary. To be culturally fluent,
we should be aware of and sensitive to the culturally determined patterns of verbal and nonverbal communication which speakers of the target culture follow, how they treat time and space, and why they think and behave the way they do (Zhang, 2008). Just as the way the other people do in eating is worthy for any one to learner.

Therefore, we should learn and master the target culture well. Because culture is a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning. Also, learning about culture can therefore be a stimulating awakening as you give meaning to your actions and the actions of others (Samovar, Porter & Stefani, 2012).

To some extent, people have intercultural awareness, that is, and good fundamental condition to train their intercultural communication competence. And then people who have intercultural communication competence, can communicate efficiently and effectively with people from other cultures, to achieve mutual understanding and to gain better cooperation. In other words, with adequate competence, people will be able to know when, where, how, to whom to say/ do what, understand why and in what ways people are similar and different, to facilitate further understanding, so as to promote friendship interaction and communication among different cultural backgrounds.

3.2.2 Cultivation of intercultural communication awareness

Intercultural awareness is the cognitive aspect of intercultural communication competence that refers to the understanding of cultural conventions that affect how we think and behave (Chen, 2010). To some extent, intercultural awareness is the foundation of intercultural communication competence. People who have good intercultural awareness, can show their own understanding of cultural differences and make appropriate reaction toward different cultures. If so, people should have good intercultural sensitivity and global thinking.

Firstly, person has individual’s ability to develop a positive emotion toward understanding and appreciating and respecting cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural interaction and communication. In this way, person with intercultural sensitivity can easily avoid misunderstanding and misbehavior and has a a strong desire to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate, respect, and even accept cultural differences so that they will adapt to a new culture or new cultural customs including food cultures and table manners.
Secondly, person should know that global communication thinking is essential in intercultural communication competence. The person with good global communication thinking can stimulate their own interest in interacting and communicating with the people from another cultural background and to give particular attention to the details of intercultural activities and explore globally significant questions and create a coherent response that considers multiple perspectives and draws useful and defensible conclusions. Meanwhile, they should have such an ability to articulate and explain the perspectives of others in a global context and compare them with their own perspective to construct anew view from intercultural communication perspective.

4 Conclusion

Everyone should know that when people coexist on the same earth, the ways to live in may vary from culture to culture, cultural differences will not necessarily create conflict. However, cultural differences follow and should not be neglected. Any personal attitude towards them should know, respect and understand the different cultures. From the above case and analysis, it is not difficult for us to find that any person should learn that host’s culture and cultural customs including food culture and table manner, in order to avoid the embarrassing situation before person enter a strange culture and its customs. People between different cultural backgrounds should learn, know, understand and respect others’ cultural differences.

Also, as the old saying, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” which clearly places the responsibility for change on the new comer, offers a great deal of wisdom, but it can not be followed in all circumstances. Moreover, people should have good knowledge about intercultural communication and master intercultural communication skills. Naturally, person will adapt to or change to fit into host culture.

In daily intercultural interaction and communication, person do not only learn the target language, but also learn the target culture, especially master intercultural communication skills involving global communication thinking, linguistic competence and cultural skill. Maybe, it is an essential approach for people to effectively interact and communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds.

References

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