

The Culture of Table Manners in Global Cinema

Jing Long

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse university, New York, USA

Abstract: Table manners and dining customs play a crucial role in shaping social interactions and reinforcing cultural traditions. This study explores the significance of these practices across various cultures, highlighting their role in creating respectful and harmonious dining environments. The dining room is often reserved for 'ceremonial' meals involving extended families on special occasions, as noted by Robin Fox. Beyond mere sustenance, dinner serves as a vital social institution that facilitates meaningful interactions and strengthens relationships among family members, friends, colleagues, and communities. By analyzing representations of table manners and dining customs in films and literature, we gain valuable insights into the social dynamics and values that underpin these practices. This examination underscores the dominant roles of family and work in shaping social interactions during meals.

Keywords: Table manner, Culture, dinner, family, Table manners, Social interactions.

1. Introduction

Table manners encompass the behavioral guidelines and customs observed during meals that help create respectful and harmonious dining environments. These practices vary significantly across cultures and regions, reflecting deeply rooted traditional values and social norms that shape how people interact during meals. According to Robin Fox, "The dining room is usually reserved for 'ceremonial' meals: those involving extended families on special occasions" [1]

Dinner extends far beyond mere sustenance, serving as a crucial social institution. It provides a space for meaningful interaction where relationships are built and strengthened through shared meals and conversation. From family gatherings to business meetings, dinners facilitate connections across various social contexts, contributing to the development of bonds between family members, friends, colleagues, and communities.

Films and literature offer valuable windows into how various societies approach table manners and dining customs. Analyzing these cultural representations reveals fundamental insights into social dynamics and values across cultures. This examination helps us understand how everyday dining practices reflect and reinforce broader cultural traditions and social norms, and the dominant roles of family and work in shaping these social interactions" [2] as indicated by Sobal, Jeffery, and Mary K. Nelson's research.

2. The Social Dynamics of Chinese Dining Culture in *Infernal Affairs*

Chinese dining culture, particularly when involving alcohol, serves multiple social functions reflecting deeply rooted cultural traditions and values. Through dinner gatherings that involve alcohol consumption, individuals establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, demonstrate power and status, express emotions and facilitate communication, transmit and preserve cultural and traditional practices, conduct business negotiations and decision-making, and alleviate stress while enhancing their social identity. In Chinese society, dinners serve as a customary platform for both social bonding and business networking, facilitating the establishment and reinforcement of personal and professional

relationships through shared dining experiences.[3] I believe these cultural phenomena enrich China's dining culture and provide a diverse range of social experiences.

In the film *Infernal Affairs*, directed by Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, Chinese drinking culture at dinner is vividly and profoundly depicted, offering valuable insights into the complexities of Chinese society and its social dynamics. The scenes serve as a critical backdrop for establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. For example, interactions between Chan Wing Yan (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) and Hon Sam (Eric Tsang) while dining reveal the complex dynamics of trust and betrayal. Chan, an undercover police officer, must maintain his cover while gathering information, and these dinner gatherings provide a setting for testing and reaffirming loyalty. The shared meals and drinks create a relaxed atmosphere allowing for more open and honest communication, which is essential for building and maintaining trust.

Seating arrangements and toasting etiquette are meticulously planned to reflect the power hierarchy and status (Chen and Lee). Leaders such as Hon Sam and Inspector Wong (Anthony Wong) are typically seated at the head of the table, symbolizing their authority and status. Subordinates are arranged according to their rank, reinforcing the hierarchical structure. Toasting is a crucial aspect of Chinese drinking culture and is prominently featured in the film. Subordinates initiate toasts to their superiors, expressing respect and loyalty. Fei Xiaotong, a leading Chinese social scientist, defined loyalty (zhong) in his book first published in 1947, as "to be sincere with others." [4] For instance, Chan Wing Yan's toasts to Hon Sam are carefully choreographed to demonstrate his allegiance, while also providing a cover for his true intentions.

Alcohol serves as a catalyst for emotional expression, allowing characters to lower their guard and reveal their true feelings (Yang). During the dinner scenes, characters use toasts and conversations to convey gratitude, respect, and sometimes, hidden agendas. For example, the interactions between Chan Wing Yan and Inspector Wong highlight the emotional and psychological complexities of their roles. These scenes not only facilitate communication but also provide a means for characters to express their emotions and build rapport.

The dinner scenes in the film adhere to traditional Chinese

dining customs, such as the proper use of chopsticks, the way to pour wine, and the order of toasting (Yang). These practices are not only a reflection of cultural heritage but also a way to honor and preserve tradition. The film highlights the cultural significance of shared meals and drinks in Chinese society. These gatherings are more than just social events; they are rituals to reinforce social bonds and cultural values (Yang). Adherence to these customs in the film underscores the importance of cultural continuity and the role of tradition in shaping social interactions.

Business banquets and social gatherings are key settings for negotiations and decision-making in *Infernal Affairs*. For example, meetings between Hon Sam and his associates, and between Inspector Wong and his team, often take place over dinner. The relaxed atmosphere facilitates open and effective discussions, leading to important decisions and agreements. The trust and rapport built during these dinner gatherings are crucial for successful operations. For Chan Wing Yan, these dinners provide opportunities to gather intelligence and build the trust necessary for his undercover mission, while also maintaining his cover.

The film's portrayal of Chinese dining culture reveals how these gatherings transcend social convention to become essential venues for relationship building, status affirmation, and business dealings. By depicting these intricate dynamics, *Infernal Affairs* depicts how shared meals and drinking customs remain deeply woven into Chinese professional and social life, where tradition and modern business practices seamlessly intersect. Through these scenes, the film offers profound insights into how dining customs reflect and reinforce the complex social fabric of Chinese society.

3. Family Dynamics and Cultural Identity Through Dinner Scenes in *The Godfather*

In the film *The Godfather*, dinner scenes serve as more than mere mealtime gatherings; they are significant platforms for showcasing the cultural and social dynamics of the Corleone family. These scenes provide a deep understanding of the internal relationships, traditional values, and social norms within the Italian-American mafia family. Through them, the concepts of family unity, tradition, power and status, trust and loyalty, and cultural transmission are vividly portrayed. These segments not only enrich the film's narrative but also offer valuable insights into the cultural dynamics of Italian-American families and, more broadly, American family culture.

Family gatherings in *The Godfather* are powerfully illustrated through dinner scenes. The opening scene of the daughter's wedding is a prime example of a family gathering. The entire family and their friends come together to celebrate, showcasing the family's unity and the importance of cultural traditions. This scene highlights the role of the family as a source of emotional support and a sense of belonging. Through shared meals, family members share their life experiences, fostering emotional connections. Multiple family dinners at Don Vito's home illustrate how he manages and guides family affairs through interactions at the dinner table, demonstrating his authority within the family and the complex relationships among family members.

The film's dinner scenes, particularly during significant celebrations such as weddings and birthdays, serve as anchors for cultural preservation. These occasions are not only

opportunities for family reunions but also to preserve and celebrate cultural traditions. In these scenes, table manners and traditional customs are strictly observed. For instance, the use of specific utensils, the order of toasting, and the respect shown to elders all show the importance of adhering to traditional practices.

During family dinners, seating arrangements reflect the hierarchy and status within the family as noticed by Simone Cinotto, the writer of "*The Italian American Table: Food, Family, and Community in New York City*."^[5] Typically, the family patriarch, in this case Don Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando), sits at the head of the table indicating his position as head of the family, with other family members seated according to their rank. Dinners are also venues for important family discussions and decision-making. For example, Don Vito often discusses and manages family affairs around the dining table, demonstrating his control and leadership.

Through shared meals, family members build strong bonds of trust. This trust is not only evident in everyday interactions but also in critical moments. For example, Don Vito reinforces his trust and loyalty among family members through family dinners and family members express their loyalty to the patriarch through toasts and conversations. These gestures are not just formalities but also affirmations of their allegiance and obedience to the family authority.

During *The Godfather's* dinner scenes, language and food are essential elements of cultural transmission (Cinotto). Family members converse in Italian and enjoy traditional Italian cuisine, highlighting their appreciation and preservation of their cultural heritage. Older family members often share stories and histories at the dining table, passing down cultural knowledge to the younger generation. This intergenerational transmission of cultural values strengthens the family's cohesion and identity.

This emphasis on family unity and support is evident in the way the Corleone family gathers for important events, such as the daughter's wedding. These gatherings underscore the role of the family as a source of emotional support and a sense of belonging; a fundamental aspect of American family culture. The strict adherence to traditional practices, such as the use of specific utensils and the order of toasting, highlights the importance of preserving cultural heritage. This is a common theme in American family culture, where families, especially those with immigrant backgrounds, strive to maintain and pass down their cultural traditions.

The seating arrangements and the role of Don Vito Corleone as the head of the family reflect a traditional patriarchal structure, which resonates with the broader American cultural norm of the father figure as the head of the household. The use of the dinner table as a venue for important family discussions and decision-making highlights the role of the family leader in guiding and managing family affairs^[6] This reflects the American value of strong leadership and the importance of family meetings in making collective decisions.

Shared meals and expressions of loyalty through toasts and conversations highlight the importance of trust and loyalty within the family^[7]. This is a core value in American family culture, where trust and loyalty are seen as essential for maintaining strong family relationships. The gestures of allegiance and obedience to the family authority, particularly to the patriarch, reflect the emphasis in American culture on respect for authority and the importance of maintaining family harmony.

The association of dinner scenes with important celebrations and festivals, such as weddings and birthdays, underscores the American value of celebrating significant life events, “The family dinner is a fine indicator of the changes that have taken place, as well as a ritual of importance. Once upon a time, many families sat down for dinner together at a set time. All members of the family were expected to be present.”^[8] These occasions are times of family reunion as well as opportunities to reinforce family traditions and create lasting memories. The strict observance of traditional rituals and ceremonies, such as the order of toasting and the respect shown to elders, reflects the American cultural emphasis on the importance of rituals in maintaining family and cultural traditions.

4. The Romantic Cultural Atmosphere in Italian Dinner Scenes: An Analysis of *Il Postino: The Postman*

Italian cinema often captures the essence of the country’s rich cultural heritage, with a particular emphasis on the significance of family, food, and emotional expression. In *Il Postino: The Postman*, directed by Michael Radford and Massimo Troisi, dinner scenes are pivotal in conveying the romantic and cultural nuances of Italian life. These scenes not only highlight the importance of family and community but also integrate food, poetry, and art while emphasizing the depth of emotional expression and harmony with nature.

Family gatherings and community connections form the heart of Italian social life.^[9] The dinner scenes in *Il Postino* frequently take place in a familial setting, such as the modest home of Mario, the postman. These scenes illustrate the close-knit relationships and warm atmosphere that characterize Italian family life. For example, when Mario invites Pablo Neruda to his home for dinner, it is not just a personal gesture but also a way for the community to welcome and embrace the poet. This communal aspect of dining underscores the importance of social bonds and shared experiences, which are deeply rooted in Italian traditions. The act of sharing a meal is a fundamental part of Italian culture, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support^[10]. It’s mentioned by Loretta Baldassare, who says “They love the food, anyone invites us for dinner, and they get special food and, so they love that, they love it.”

In Italian culture, food serves as a powerful medium of expression, and the dinner scenes in *Il Postino* showcase this deep connection. The meals are rich and varied, featuring traditional Italian dishes such as seafood and pasta. These foods are not merely sustenance but also a means of expressing love, hospitality, and cultural identity. The attention to table settings and dining etiquette further emphasizes reverence for the dining experience, adding a sense of ritual and celebration to meals. In Italy, food is a form of communication, a way to show care and affection. The preparation and presentation of meals are often seen as acts of love, and the act of sitting down to eat together is a sacred and cherished moment.

The dinner scenes in *Il Postino* elegantly interweave poetry and daily life, particularly through Neruda’s verses that become Mario’s vehicle for expressing his love for Beatrice. These moments transform ordinary meals into artistic experiences, where poetry naturally flows alongside conversation and dining. This seamless integration reflects a distinctly Italian approach to life, where artistic expression is

not reserved for special occasions but can be found in everyday moments.

The film’s treatment of poetry during meals reinforces the Italian cultural value of artistic appreciation, where the ability to understand and recite poetry marks a deeper engagement with life’s experiences. Through these scenes, the film demonstrates how art, particularly poetry, serves as a natural conduit for expressing profound emotions and ideas in Italian culture, making the dinner table not just a place for sharing food, but also for sharing one’s soul through artistic expression. The dinner scenes in *Il Postino* are marked by deep emotional connections.

The friendship between Mario and Neruda is a central theme, and their dinners are filled with genuine and heartfelt conversations. Whether it is the initial nervousness of their first meeting or the poignant farewell before Neruda’s departure, these scenes capture the depth of their bond. Additionally, Mario’s romantic dinners with Beatrice, where he uses poetry to express his love, highlight the romantic and expressive nature of Italian emotional communication. In Italian culture, emotions are openly expressed and celebrated, and the dinner table is often a place where these emotions are shared and explored.

Italian culture places a high value on the natural environment, and this is reflected in the outdoor dining scenes in *Il Postino*. Meals are often set against the backdrop of beautiful landscapes, such as the beach at sunset or a garden under the moonlight. These settings create a romantic and idyllic atmosphere, emphasizing the harmonious relationship between people and nature. The natural beauty of the surroundings enhances the emotional and aesthetic qualities of the dining experience. In Italy, an appreciation of nature is deeply ingrained in the culture, and outdoor dining is common, especially in the warmer months. The combination of good food, good company, and a beautiful setting is seen as the epitome of the Italian lifestyle.

The dinner scenes in *Il Postino: The Postman* offer a rich tapestry of Italian cultural and romantic elements. Through the depiction of family and community, the integration of food and life, the role of poetry and art, the depth of emotional expression, and the harmony with nature, the film provides a vivid and nuanced portrayal of Italian culture. These scenes not only highlight the importance of these cultural aspects but also underscore the romantic and poetic essence that defines Italian life (Marcus; Bondanella). The film captures the essence of what it means to be Italian, where every meal is a celebration, every conversation is a poem, and every moment is infused with a deep sense of love and connection.

5. The Dinner Scene in *Before Midnight*: A Reflection of French Culture

The pivotal dinner scene in Richard Linklater’s *Before Midnight* (2013) captures the essence of French culture through its intimate portrayal of a shared meal. This scene not only showcases the culinary and cultural aspects of France but also delves deeply into the relationship between Jesse and Celine, as well as their attitudes toward life. Through these details, the audience experiences the unique charm of French culture and the complex, genuine emotions of the characters. The dinner scene serves as a pivotal moment in the film, setting the stage for subsequent developments.

The dinner table is laden with a variety of meticulously

prepared French dishes, including fresh seafood, roasted meats, assorted cheeses, and a selection of fine wines. Each dish exemplifies the high art of French cooking and the careful selection of ingredients. In French culture, dining etiquette is highly valued, and every detail of the meal reflects this. The characters gather around the table, savoring each bite and enjoying the experience. This meticulous and elegant approach to dining underscores the French appreciation for life and attention to detail. Ritualistic actions, such as toasting and sharing food, enhance the cultural ambiance of the meal.

In *Before Midnight*, the dinner scene masterfully demonstrates how French culture uses shared meals as platforms for emotional expression. As Jesse and Celine dine with their companions, their interactions unfold through delicate gestures - exchanged glances, whispered words, and subtle touches - creating an atmosphere charged with both intimacy and tension. These moments of connection ripple through the gathering, affecting everyone at the table. For instance, when they discuss memories or the future, their eyes convey deep emotion and anticipation, adding to the romantic tone of the scene. The dinner conversations cover a range of topics, including love, marriage, and personal growth. Jesse and Celine share their experiences and feelings, creating a warm yet slightly tense atmosphere reflecting the depth and complexity of their relationship. For example, when they discuss issues such as child-rearing and career development, their mutual support and understanding deepen the audience's understanding of their bond.

The dinner scene also highlights the French pursuit of a free and fulfilling lifestyle showing that their lives are too free to be enjoyable. This point is motioned by Theodore Zeldin in his book.^[1] Set in a beautiful Greek town, the characters enjoy fine food and wine, immersed in natural beauty. This carefree and liberated way of life embodies the spirit of French freedom. Despite the challenges they face, Jesse and Celine strive for inner peace and freedom. For instance, after the dinner, they take a leisurely walk by the sea, enjoying the tranquility of the night, which underscores their love for life and their pursuit of freedom. The dinner conversations also touch on various topics, including sex, love, marriage, family, and social issues. The characters are unafraid to express their opinions and challenge traditional norms, reflecting the openness and inclusivity of French society. Discussions about open relationships, gender equality, and personal freedom showcase the depth of their thoughts and the liberal nature of French culture.

French culture emphasizes quality of life and emotional expression, and these elements are fully realized in the dinner scene. From the exquisite food to the elegant dining etiquette, and profound dialogue and emotional exchanges, the scene creates a picture imbued with French charm. The spirit of French freedom is not only evident in their thoughts but also in their lifestyle. The dinner scene in *Before Midnight* illustrates how the characters pursue freedom and peace in their daily lives, a theme that runs throughout the film and allows the audience to appreciate the unique allure of French culture. The scene is not just a showcase of French culinary traditions, but also a deep exploration of Jesse and Celine's emotional world, setting the stage for the rest of the narrative.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, dinner scenes in global cinema offer profound insights into the cultural fabric of different nations,

transcending simple depictions of meals to open a window onto deeper lifestyles, societal values, and traditions. Dinner scenes in Chinese films frequently depict gatherings where members come together to share meals, reinforcing the bonds of kinship and respect for tradition. The preparation and presentation of food, along with the rituals of dining, such as toasting and table manners, highlight the cultural emphasis on order, respect, and familial unity. These scenes underscore the deep-rooted values of collectivism and the significance of maintaining social harmony.

American cinema, on the other hand, tends to showcase the themes of individualism and multiculturalism. Dinner scenes in American cinema often reflect the diverse and dynamic nature of society in the country, where people from various backgrounds and ethnicities come together to share meals. These scenes highlight the personal stories and emotional journeys of the characters, emphasizing the importance of self-expression and the pursuit of individual dreams. The diversity of the dishes and the conversation around the table also reflects the melting pot of cultures that characterizes American society, showcasing the country's commitment to inclusivity and personal freedom.

Italian films, with their focus on romanticism and a zest for life, use dinner scenes to celebrate the joy of living and the warmth of human connections. These scenes often depict lively and intimate gatherings, where friends and family share delicious meals and engage in heartfelt conversations. The emphasis on good food, conviviality, and the appreciation of simple pleasures reflects the passion for life evident in Italian culture and the importance of strong social ties. The inclusion of poetry, art, and music in these scenes further enhances the romantic and artistic atmosphere, highlighting the cultural value placed on beauty and creativity.

French cinema, known for its sophistication and intellectual depth, uses dinner scenes to exemplify a refined lifestyle, emotional expression, and intellectual freedom, all hallmarks of French culture. These scenes often feature meticulously prepared meals, elegant dining etiquette, and profound, engaging conversations. The intimate and sometimes ambiguous atmosphere of these dinners underscores the French appreciation for quality of life and the importance of emotional and intellectual connections. The open and free-spirited discussions that take place reflect the French values of personal freedom and the pursuit of a fulfilling and meaningful existence.

Through their varied portrayals of shared meals, these films illuminate how different cultures approach community and tradition. This cross-cultural exploration highlights the beauty and diversity of global cultures, fostering a greater appreciation for the richness of human experience. Ultimately, these dinner scenes serve as a powerful reminder of the universal importance of food, community, and shared experiences in shaping our cultural identities and enriching our lives.

References

- [1] Fox, Robin. "Food and Eating: An Anthropological Perspective." Social Issues Research Centre, 4 Mar. 2015.
- [2] Sobal, Jeffery, and Mary K. Nelson. "Commensal Eating Patterns: A Community Study." *Appetite*, vol. 41, no. 2, Oct. 2003, pp. 181-90. Crossref, doi:10.1016/s0195-6663(03)00078-3.

- [3] Ma, Guansheng. "Food, Eating Behavior, and Culture in Chinese Society." *Journal of Ethnic Foods*, vol. 2, no. 4, Dec. 2015, pp. 195–99. Crossref, doi:10.1016/j.jef.2015.11.004.
- [4] Fei, Xiaotong. *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*. U of California P, 1993. Crossref, doi:10.1525/9780520912489.
- [5] Cinotto, Simone. *The Italian American Table: Food, Family, and Community in New York City*. U of Illinois P, 2013. Project MUSE, muse.jhu.edu/book/27440.
- [6] Etzioni, Amitai. "Holidays and Rituals." *We Are What We Celebrate*, NYU P, 31 Dec. 2020, pp. 3–40. Crossref, doi:10.18574/nyu/9780814722916.003.0003.
- [7] Wilk, Richard. "Power at the Table: Food Fights and Happy Meals." *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2010, pp. 428–36. Crossref, doi:10.1177/1532708610372764.
- [8] Di Leonardo, Micaela. *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience*. Cornell UP, 1 Jan. 1984. Crossref, doi:10.7591/9781501721250.
- [9] Barthes, Roland. "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption." *Food and Culture: A Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan et al., Routledge, 2012, pp. 23–30. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- [10] Baldassar, Loretta. *Visits Home: Migration Experiences between Italy and Australia*. Melbourne UP, 2001.
- [11] *Books for College Libraries: History*. American Library Association, 1988.