



FOOD PREFERENCES OF CHINESE TOURISTS

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Abstract: Given the scarcity of research on tourist food preference, this study is a first attempt to generate in-depth understanding of Chinese tourists' food preferences in a culturally different environment by employing on-site participant observations and focus group interviews. It provides a detailed analysis of the motivational factors underlying the Chinese participants' food preferences when holidaying in Australia, and also proposes a typology that describes and contrasts the participants' tourism dining attitudes, motivations and behaviors. Furthermore, this study elucidates the influence of Chinese food culture on the participants' tourism dining behaviors and explores the disparities in dining behavioral patterns between the participants in terms of their dining motivations and the way they related tourism dining experiences to their daily experiences. **Keywords:** tourist food preference, tourism dining behavior, motivational factors, Chinese tourists, Chinese food culture, gastronomy tourism. © 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike other forms of travel activities and attractions, tourism dining is an art form that gratifies all of the five human senses—vision, tactile, auditory, taste, and olfaction (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). With such an idiosyncratic nature, tourism dining is often considered a sensory pleasure activity that fulfills the experiential part of a holiday experience (Hjalager & Richards, 2002). In addition, food is an essential aspect in understanding the culture of a society, and an important medium for cultural expression (Fieldhouse, 1986). Thus, food comprises a substantial part of the appeal a destination offers. Scarpato (2002) further contends that food satisfies all the conventional requirements of cultural tourism products. Hence, tourism dining has increasingly

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become a major conduit for tourists to appreciate the local culture of a destination (Kivela & Crotts, 2006).

While it is a widely held belief that food in tourism is a significant “attraction” (Hjalager & Richards, 2002), Cohen and Avieli (2004) however stress that local food at a destination could be an “impediment” under certain circumstances. They point out that local food might become acceptable to tourists only if it is modified to the tourists’ palate, and that the confrontation with “strange” and “unfamiliar” local cuisine might present a considerable challenge for some tourists. Indeed, some tourists may suffer from “food neophobia,” a concept which refers to human’s natural tendency to dislike or suspect new and unfamiliar foods (Pliner & Salvy, 2006). Similarly, Lepp and Gibson (2003) identified “strange food” as one of the seven risk factors perceived by tourists. Hence, destination marketers, hospitality businesses, and tour operators are faced with the challenge of how to appropriately portray and present their local cuisine as an attraction and to mitigate the risk that it will be interpreted as an impediment. Such an endeavor requires an in-depth understanding of tourists’ different food preferences and dining behaviors (Quan & Wang, 2004).

Nonetheless, despite the central role of dining in the holiday experience, the interface between food and tourism has received scant research attention. Cohen and Avieli (2004, p. 757) underscore that eating and drinking remain “virtually unexplored in the sociological and anthropological study of tourism, notwithstanding their obvious centrality in the experience.” Although there is a growing interest in research into food experiences in tourism, Kim, Eves, and Scarles (2009) indicate that research on tourist food consumption is at its infancy, and is still establishing its basic tenets. In addition, most of the existing research focus on Western tourists; studies based on non-Western and Asian tourists are scarce. To date, there is no empirical study examining the food preferences and dining behaviors of Chinese tourists, thereby revealing a knowledge gap in understanding this important market segment. Consequently, this study aims to fill part of this gap by investigating Chinese tourists’ food preferences while they are holidaying in Australia. The specific objectives of the study include: to explore Chinese tourists’ food preferences and the motivational factors underlying such preferences, to develop a typology describing Chinese tourists’ tourism dining behaviors, to examine the influences of Chinese food culture on tourists’ dining behaviors, and to identify any intergroup disparities in dining behavioral patterns among the Chinese tourists.

TOURIST FOOD PREFERENCE AND DINING BEHAVIOR

Definition of Food Preference and Local Food

Food preference in general refers to the selection of one food item over the other (Rozin & Vollmecke, 1986). In the context of this study, the term “food preference” is defined as tourists’ expressed choice between two or more food items available in the destination. Local

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