



Food consumption when travelling abroad: Young Chinese sojourners' food consumption in the UK

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the everyday food choices of 21 Chinese sojourners living in two different localities in the UK. Findings from a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews reveal how participants adopt a food consumption pattern, negotiating between ordinary and extraordinary food choices, including home-made Chinese food, Chinese restaurant food, global brands, British food, to “foods of the world”. Their zooming in and out of different food consumption choices reflects the transformative identity of the sojourners, between their student role during the week and becoming tourists at the weekends, meshing work and tourism during their sojourning in the UK. Theoretically this paper extends the limited understanding of sojourners, showing how their complex food choices reflect their swift transformative identity. Findings also illustrate how consumption patterns adopted by sojourners living in rural areas differ from the ones living in an urban setting.

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1. Introduction

Food consumption is essential for international travellers, to sustain their well-being and to experience and understand the culture of a society (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). Whilst existing literature has attempted to explore tourist food preferences in culturally different environments, providing detailed account of the motivation factors that explain tourists' food preferences during their travel (Kim, Eves, & Scarles, 2009; Li, Lai, Harrill, Kline, & Wang, 2011; Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2010), there is limited research attention on sojourners' food consumption leaving it a challenge to destination marketers, hospitality businesses, tour operators and policy makers (Brown, 2009b; Brown, Edwards, & Hartwell, 2010). This paper contributes to the scant literature on sojourners' food consumption in relation to their identity.

Not all travellers are short-term tourists; in recent years,

international students' studying abroad has emerged as a new tourism market (Gardiner & Kwek, 2017). Different from immigrants, international students are sojourners who have a clear home orientation as their sojourning is temporary (albeit relatively long-term) and linked to specific purposes, for example, pursuing a higher education degree (Brown, 2009a). Often 'international sojourner' refers to a temporary between-society contact of between 6 months and 5 years (Hottola, 2004; Jandt, 2001). Unlike short-stay tourists, who are not really committed to their new locations during their visit, a sojourner typically lives in a country for a longer period of time, with a specific and goal-oriented purpose, and is usually inclined to adjust to some extent to local cultural norms (Gudykunst, 1998), displaying the hallmarks of openness, flexibility and tolerance (Brown, 2009a; Brown et al., 2010; O'Reilly, 2006).

Sojourners may be seen as immigrants, performing daily mundane tasks, for example, going to work and/or schools during the week; other studies suggest that sojourners have a more complex identity than immigrants because they also share similar identity traits to tourists (Pocock & McIntosh, 2013; Williams & Hall, 2002). Their food consumption behaviour cannot be explained using tourists' motivation alone, as food consumption itself becomes an important medium for their cultural expression

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(Brown, 2009b; Fieldhouse, 2013) and an enactment of their cultural identity during their sojourn (Cappellini & Yen, 2013; Shankar et al., 2009).

Contemporary sojourners, such as international students travelling abroad for higher education purposes, represent a growing number of tourists temporarily leaving their home country (Brown et al., 2010). The 4.3 million international students who travel to other countries for education purposes annually (OECD, 2013) are a sizeable consumer segment that requires further research attention, as existing works on immigrants or short-term tourists cannot be applied to fully explain their consumption choices abroad (Brown, 2009a, 2009b). In the UK, Chinese students represent the group with the strongest presence, reaching 91,215 in 2015/2016 and exceeding any other nationality (UKCISA 2017). As avid consumers of global consumer culture and keen shoppers of global brands (Wang, 2009), they represent a major source of economy income, having a significant impact on local tourism and the hospitality sector (Gardiner & Kwek, 2017). However, research on these sojourners' consumption patterns remains limited (Chung, Holdsworth, Li, & Fam, 2009), revealing a knowledge gap in understanding this important market segment.

To address this research gap, this paper aims to investigate a group of Chinese international students' food consumption behaviours and the identity that underlay such consumption patterns during their sojourning in the UK. Specifically, the research objectives include: 1) to explore young Chinese sojourners' food consumption behaviour in relation to their sojourner identity and 2) to illustrate how the locality context shapes their food consumption in the UK.

2. Literature review

2.1. Identity on the move

A sojourner is a short-term visitor staying temporarily in a host country for specific reasons, including work or studies (Berry & Sam, 1997). They differ from short-term tourists due to their intention to make a living in the country of their visit during their relatively long-term travel by "meshing work with tourism, routine with novelty, and familiarity with strangeness" (Pocock & McIntosh, 2013, p. 404). Nevertheless, sojourners are also dissimilar from immigrants because they have the intention to return home at some stage in the future, thus all the adjustment made during their sojourns may be reversed upon their return home.

Food consumption, which many sojourners describe as one of the most problematic aspects of their stay in a new environment, is an emblematic example of the difficulties faced during the initial phases of their stay (Cappellini & Yen, 2013). Edwards, Hartwell, and Brown (2010) highlight how reshaping food consumption patterns in the new environment is a source of anxiety, since what international students eat has great significance both physically and emotionally. At the initial readjusting stage, characterised by instabilities and stress, many students "made many changes in their lives, except in the area of eating habits and practices" (Brown, 2009a, p. 52). If sojourners are prepared to adjust their everyday routine, food can remain an area in which continuity with the home culture is desirable. Therefore, initially sojourners share similar traits to some short-term tourists who prefer to stick to their familiar food and global brands for safety and reassurance (Bengtsson, Bardhi, & Venkatraman, 2010; Chang et al., 2010; Osman, Johns, & Lugosi, 2014) because food from home represents a symbol of security, a healthy lifestyle and the maintenance of social relationships with fellow sojourners (Bardhi, Ostberg, & Bengtsson, 2010). Consequently, foods considered alien are tried sporadically and not included in the daily routine (Bengtsson et al.,

2010).

If the above studies show how sojourners are not very inclined to change their food habits at the initial stage, other studies, focusing on the post cultural shock phase, have shown how sojourners change their food patterns and habits over time (see for example, Brosius, 2012; Tirelli & Martinez-Ruiz, 2014). Perez-Cueto, Verbeke, Lachat, and Remau-DE Winter (2009) show how international students sojourning in Belgium changed their diets after their arrival (85% of the sample), having increased the amount of some food items (vegetables and fruits) and decreased the consumption of others (confectionary). Others have highlighted how sojourners introduce new food items typical of the new cultural environment to their diets, lamenting gaining weight and shifts in food habits (Hartwell, John, Edwards, & Brown, 2011; McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

Considering the scarcity of research on sojourners and their food choices, this study attempts to answer Brown's (2009a) call for more research attention on sojourners by investigating how food choices are linked to their identity negotiation.

2.2. Chinese consumers and food

The Chinese culture is food centred (Simmons, 1991). Food forms part of the Chinese collective and individual identity, and sharing food is considered a way of strengthening familial and cultural bonds (Veeck & Burns, 2005). Given such a centrality of food, it is not surprising to know that when travelling abroad, Chinese consumers have a stronger ethnic retention compared to other nationalities (Chung, 2000). Vieregge, Lin, Drakopoulos, and Bruggmann (2009) show that second and even third generation of Chinese immigrants living in Switzerland consume daily Chinese food at home and choose Chinese restaurants as their favourite eating out option. Li et al. (2011) report that when Chinese tourists travel outside Asia, they prefer to have Chinese food at least once a day, either as a lunch or dinner option.

Despite such a strong attachment to the so-called 'traditional' Chinese food, studies have shown that global food brands are considered very popular options amongst young Chinese consumers. Works investigating the success of McDonald's and KFC in China during the 1980s and 1990s (Watson, 2000; Yan, 2000) demonstrate how the consumption experience attached to global food brands attracts enthusiastic young consumers, in particular children and teenagers. Eckhardt and Houston (2002) reveal how for many young Chinese consumers McDonald's is a part of their everyday lives, suitable for informal gatherings, lunch breaks, romantic dates and children's parties. Venkatraman and Nelson (2008) note how Chinese young adults enjoy the atmosphere evoked by the Starbucks brand, although they do not like the taste of its coffee. The consumption experience of Starbucks was considered exotic but also familiar and reassuring, since it bridges the local culture with a more Westernised and globalised one.

Considering the spread of global food brands in young consumers' everyday lives, there is a need to understand how such consumption is incorporated into their travels and sojourns. For example, in their study of American tourists travelling to China, Bengtsson et al. (2010) reveal how global brands such as McDonald's through its use of English language, standardised menu and service, offers tourists the perceived consistency, predictability and familiarity, thus providing a sense of home and safety in an unknown and challenging context. Osman et al. (2014) adds that McDonald's is also consumed by European tourists abroad to their broader touristic endeavours, to reconstruct their transformative identity, to engage with the destination, and to assess globalisation and with authenticity. However, as sojourners differ from short-term tourists in that they do plan to stay and making a living in

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