

A TASTE OF CULTURE: PERCEPTIONS ABOUT AMERICAN FAST FOOD IN CHINA

by

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This exploratory study examined perceptions about American fast food among urban, Beijing residents to explore three major objectives; perceptions about taste preferences and nutrition value, the eating relationships of group harmony and sharing dishes, and the modern values of fast and convenient food in a clean environment. The 40 semi-structured interviews were completed in the summer of 2011. The informants were selected by age, gender, and occupation. Younger informants, 18 to 30 years old, were exposed to American fast food during their childhood and adolescent periods. Older informants, over 40 years old, did not come into contact with American fast food until they had already established their food consumption patterns.

The findings reveal few differences between younger and older informants because all informants restrict some American fast food consumption for both taste and health reasons. American fast food is only suitable to about half of the informants' taste palatability. They all prefer Chinese cuisine when given the choice. They perceive American fast food to be unhealthy because it uses food adulterants, contains high fat content, and lacks balance between food groups. Families eating together avoid American fast food restaurants to maintain group harmony. However, younger informants enjoy American style fast food because it provides a modern environment to socialize with friends.

A TASTE OF CULTURE: PERCEPTIONS ABOUT AMERICAN FAST FOOD IN CHINA

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Food consumption is a vital and essential daily activity for all humans. People are motivated to eat and drink to satisfy physiological needs of the body. It provides nourishment to the body and fulfills hunger cues. Consumption habits are not uniform as they vary across cultures. To understand food consumption patterns and variations, there is a need to explore consumption patterns in a cultural context. Cultural variations in food consumption practices and habits are unique to a culture. It represents an extension of their cultural identity (Bourdieu, 1984; Kittler, & Sucher, 1989). Cultural norms, including Confucian principles, have guided behavioral norms in China (So & Walker, 2006). The American style fast food eating culture is a representation of the American lifestyle. It provides a standardized product focused on fast and convenient food.

Prior to the late 1980s and early 1990s, most Chinese people had not sampled foreign, specifically American, foods (Yan, 1997). Prior to this time period, Chinese government's restrictions on businesses, travel, and information prevented the flow of intercultural exchanges. The cultural exchanges occurred within China as various regional cuisines were brought into Beijing. As the political center and capital city of China, Beijing has attracted various cooking styles. Beijing's cuisine variations originate from other Chinese regions; it has hosted Sichuan, Shanghainese, Ghuanzhou, Shanxi, Shangdong, and Hebei cuisines, among other regions' cuisines. The Beijing cuisine is largely based on the cultural practices of the northern Chinese people, the largest ethnic group in China (Kittler & Sucher, 1989). Beijing, located in northern China, has a relatively dry climate. The dry climate limits rice production so Beijing residents have long depended on wheat products such as noodles (Chang, 1997; Lv & Brown, 2010). Frequent exposure to certain foods eventually influences eating habits over time and rice is now

an integral part of the Beijing diet (Chang, 1997; Lv & Brown, 2010). The frequent exposure of various regional cuisines eventually blended into the local landscape. Recent historic changes have allowed more foreign businesses, such as American fast food franchise restaurants to operate in China.

The historic changes that China has experienced over the course of the last 60 years have influenced eating habits. In turn, present eating habits are a reflection of these changes. In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party was established in China. This led to the gradual establishment of agricultural collectivization until the Great Leap Forward of 1958-1960 (Rawski, 2007). The policy was aimed to transform the economy into a modern communist country through the process of agriculturalization, industrialization, and collectivization. However, this marked a 20-year period of widespread hunger and deprivation until the reform policies of the late 1970s (Rawski, 2007). The economic reforms that launched in 1978 removed many restrictions on the private businesses and corporations (Carlsisle & Flynn, 2005). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the economic reforms included de-collectivization of agriculture, foreign investments, and business entrepreneurship. The government maintained control for most industries until they were privatized in the late 1980s and 1990s. Over the last three decades, China has transitioned towards a market economy to become one of the world's fastest growing global economies (Dauderstadt & Stetten, 2005; Fox, 1999).

Since 1978, China has removed many of its restrictions on the private businesses and corporations including price controls, protectionist policies, and regulations (Carlsisle & Flynn, 2005). China's transition towards a market economy was one of the world's fastest growing global economies (Dauderstadt & Stetten, 2005; Fox, 1999). Economic reforms and improvements in living standards have increased consumer purchasing power, including food

items (Waldmeir, 2011; Yan, 1997). American fast food restaurants entered the Beijing landscape in the late 1980s and early 1990s during a period when independent entrepreneurs were allowed to operate openly in China for the first time since 1949 (Watson, 1997).

Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) entered the Beijing market in 1987 as a subsidiary of Yum Brands. Five years later, in 1992, McDonald's Restaurant opened its first restaurant in Beijing and Burger King entered the Chinese market in 2005. This market penetration led to questions regarding the success of American fast food in Beijing. KFC has stayed ahead of its rivals, both in terms of consumer brand awareness and total number of restaurants (The Economist, 2008). KFC has remained as the top fast food restaurant as it earned more operating profit in China than in the U.S. in 2010 (Rooney, 2010; Waldmeir, 2011). A widely discussed topic is whether American fast food restaurants in China have altered the eating patterns of Chinese people (Fox, 1999; The Economist, 2008; Waldmeir, 2011). In Beijing, 80 percent had eaten at a McDonald's restaurant or KFC in 2002 (Curtis et al., 2007). However, there remain unanswered questions about how this market penetration has influenced Chinese eating patterns by age, gender, and occupation.

When American fast food restaurants first opened its doors, consumers were curious to sample the food and experience the American cultural dining style. It was packed with young friends hanging out and socializing, and children accompanied by their parents (Watson, 1997). Large numbers of consumers packed these restaurants, but adult consumers did not eat it often, did not feel full, and they not enjoy it in the early 1990s (Yan, 1997). One potential explanation is that adult consumers remain persistent with traditional Chinese food because they already established eating patterns and preferences (Chang et al, 2010; Wright, Nancarrow, & Kwok, 2001). Since American fast food penetrated the Chinese market just two decades ago, there is a

window of opportunity to examine the difference between the younger and older generations. Chinese consumers born after 1990s never experienced a time without American fast food. There is evidence that children experienced changes in dietary patterns due to modern fast food consumption (Adair & Popkin, 2005). However, Chinese consumers who had come of age before the 1990s had had already established taste preferences.

This exploratory study attempted to understand how food consumption patterns have changed from adopting American fast food in China. This study examines Beijing residents' eating habits, knowledge, and willingness to try American fast food. People from certain cultures prefer some foods as opposed to others. They establish taste preferences and eating habits during their childhood and adolescent periods (Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2010). People are eager to sample new foods and seek new food experiences. However, they remain persistent with traditional food items. The use of ingredients, cooking methods, and nutritional value of the food are important to determine the type cuisine. Secondly, this study will explore how social relationships influence eating habits. Friends, family members, and colleagues influence the decision-making process. Lastly, this study looks at how food preferences are an expression of culture and ongoing cultural change. Due to frequent exposure to foreign foods, American fast food can blend into the local urban culture. The investigation compared responses across age, gender, and occupation.

This thesis includes five chapters. Following this introductory chapter, the second chapter is a review of the literature and provides a background for the research investigation. The third chapter, field research methodology, describes the research objectives, site selection, sampling strategy, data collection, data analysis, reflection, and significance of study. The fourth chapter,

food consumption attitudes in Beijing, synthesizes the results from the semi-structured interviews. The last chapter provides a discussion and conclusion

CHAPTER 2: SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES ABOUT FOOD CONSUMPTION

Chinese eating preferences and habits

The cultural food practices such as basic food items and ingredients, cooking techniques, and flavor principles can develop a cuisine (Chang et al., 2010; Lv & Brown, 2010). This determines which foods and food qualities are acceptable to the Chinese palates (Prescott, Young, O'Neill, Yau, & Stevens, 2002). Traditional Beijing cuisine has been influenced mostly by the preferences of the northern Chinese people (Kittler & Sucher, 1989). Beijing is located in northern China where it has a relatively dry climate that limits local rice production so Beijing cuisine has an emphasis on wheat such as noodles. Foreign ingredients and practices have been incorporated into the local cuisine. The Chinese typically eat three meals a day along with snacks (Kittler & Sucher, 1989). Breakfast often includes hot rice porridge congee, and may include hot steamed bread, dumplings, or noodles. In urban areas, lunch is a smaller version of dinner, such as soup, rice or noodles, vegetables, and fish or meat (Kittler & Sucher, 1989). Almost all studies generally agreed as to what makes up traditional Chinese meals, but much differed on the Chinese reaction to foreign food.

The Chinese eat a wide variety of foods and avoid very few types of food, which may stem partly from recurrent famine (Kittler & Sucher, 1989). Food groups can be categorized by an individual's consumption frequency. The categories are core foods, secondary core foods, and peripheral foods. Core foods include staples that are part of the diet, secondary core foods are widely but less frequently eaten, and foods that are eaten sporadically are called peripheral foods. In each culture, a meal is made up of certain elements. Previous studies had attempted to define a traditional Chinese meal, which includes a staple such as rice or noodles with vegetable and meat dishes (Chang, 1997; Lv & Brown, 2010). One essential characteristic of Chinese meals is that it

has to be hot (Watson, 1997; Yan, 1997). Chinese consumers generally have not considered raw, cold foods, such as sandwiches and salads, to be acceptable meals (Watson, 1997).

There seems to be a general agreement that eating patterns are shaped by childhood experiences (Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2010; Curtis, McCluskey, & Wahl, 2007; Fowler, 1997; Guo, Mroz, Popkin, & Zhai, 2000; Lv & Brown, 2010). Chinese people born prior to 1970 are unlikely to have seen American fast food restaurants as part of the Beijing landscape in their adolescent periods (Pine, 2002; Waldmeir, 2011). Previous studies also show that older people remain persistent with traditional food items because they have already established eating patterns (Chang et al, 2010; Wright et al., 2001). In contrast, younger people have been exposed to American fast food throughout their childhood and adolescent periods.

In a study to examine Chinese people on vacation in Australia for a short-term period, results from the focus-group interviews show that Chinese people prefer Chinese food even if they are enthusiastic about sampling foreign food (Chang et al., 2010). Many could not eat foreign food for every meal. Some modified the food so it could become acceptable to the Chinese palate. They can add ingredients such as soy sauce and pickled vegetables to mitigate the unfamiliar taste. This serves as an effective means to enhance the food. Fischler (1988) draws a distinction between the neophobic and neophilic tendencies in taste. This suggests that people have a natural tendency to dislike foreign and unfamiliar foods, yet also have a tendency to search for foreign foods. Research has recognized that across cultures and regardless of socio-demographic differences, people generally prefer foods that are familiar to them (Pliner, Pelchat, & Grabski, 1993). Some people are cautious about sampling foreign food because they are uncertain about some of the ingredients used or method of preparation (Chang et al., 2010; Lv & Brown, 2010). In addition, China has widespread lactose intolerance among ethnic Chinese

people (Chang et al., 2010; Lv & Brown, 2010). Some people seek unique and original food items (Sklair, 1994).

The desire to be healthy and to put healthy items into the body is a fundamental Chinese cultural value and practice (Lv & Brown, 2010). The traditional, rural Chinese diet is based on high intake of plant-based protein, low in dietary cholesterol, and low in dietary fat (Campbell & Campbell, 2004). Chinese diets contain large nutrient from plant-based foods rather than animal-based foods. Modern American fast food consumption and snacks play only a small role in the Chinese diets (Adair & Popkin, 2005). American diets have high concentrations of dietary fat and dietary cholesterol from the meat, carbohydrates, and sugar (Campbell & Campbell, 2004). American fast food makes up 20% of the energy intake for Americans while it plays a much smaller role in China (Adair & Popkin, 2005). China has not followed the American consumption trends in soft drinks and snack consumption, which may explain the small variances among youths in both rural and urban regions.

Chinese-American parents living in the U.S have restricted some food items or ingredients because of health concerns (Lv and Brown (2010). They perceive these ingredients as unhealthy because of the high fat content; whole milk, cheese, butter, preserved food, chips, soda, and chocolate (Curtis et al., 2010; Lv & Brown, 2010). Although many Chinese parents in the U.S. have restricted processed foods, there is still a trend both in the U.S. and China to adopt many western-style snack foods such as processed potato products (Curtis et al., 2007; Lv & Brown, 2010). Curtis et al. (2007) surveyed Beijing residents' consumption of French fries, mashed potatoes, and potato chips. In total, 599 Beijing residents were surveyed in 2002 where the majority of respondents were in their late 30s and early 40s. The results varied for potato products between males and females, where younger males enjoyed mashed potatoes more often

while younger females enjoyed potato chips. Almost half of the respondents ate potato chips monthly, while 41 percent ate French fries and 23.4 percent ate mashed potatoes (Curtis et al., 2007). Evaluation of consumer characteristics and attitudes reveal that only 15.5 percent of Beijing residents preferred western-style convenience food to traditional Chinese food. Beijing residents have increased consumption of processed potato products.

An ethnographic survey about perceptions about McDonald's was completed just two years after the first McDonald's restaurant opened in Beijing in 1994 (Yan, 1997). In the study, college students in Beijing did not reach the point of satiety after eating at McDonald's food. Most of them considered American fast food to be a snack rather than a formal meal because some of the fast food items resembled traditional Chinese snacks from street vendors in China. Only one-fourth of the informants regarded McDonald's food as a formal meal, and they were mostly women. Over half, 56 percent of informants did not feel they had a satisfying meal as it appeared most commonly among young men. However, the ethnography was conducted only two years after the first McDonald's restaurant opened in Beijing. After 20 years, there may be differences about American fast food perceptions among Beijing residents. For example, McDonald's entered the Hong Kong market in 1975 and many young consumers began treating it as formal meals in the 1980s (Watson, 1997).

Since the introduction of American fast food in East Asia excluding China, there has been a change in consumption pattern (Yan, 1997). The study on the globalization of McDonald's restaurant in Beijing occurred soon after its debut, therefore, the Chinese consumption pattern remained mostly the same. American fast food penetrated China much later than its East Asian peers so there remain unanswered questions regarding Chinese perceptions of American fast food. In other East Asian cultures, both American fast food and Chinese people

undergo a process of acculturation when they come into contact. The process of change can occur both ways as American fast food adapts to local practices and preferences while remaining a foreign entity.

Chinese Value of Social Relationships

A major influence on development patterns in China is the overarching cultural norms (Bourdieu, 1984; Chang et al., 2010; Warde, 1997). The Chinese society values relationships, especially family ties, to build the social order in China (So & Walker, 2006). Confucianism established moral norms, *renqing* and *guanxi*. *Renqing* guides Chinese behavior by calling for expressions of mutual trust and reciprocity (So & Walker, 2006). The Chinese term *guanxi* does not have an equivalent word in English although the simple translation is “relationship” (So & Walker, 2006). The norms of *guanxi* direct behavioral norms based on Confucian principles of personal connections and reciprocity rather than formal rules and law (Hackley & Dong, 2001; So & Walker, 2006).

Social class membership is important in China because Chinese people place great importance on group harmony and interdependence (Bond, 1986; Chang et al., 2010; Fei, 1992). Fei Xiaotong (1992) described the foundations of Chinese society by contrasting the cultural practices and norms of Chinese and Western societies. The Chinese family is a medium through which all activities are organized (Fei, 1992). The self is at the center and the expansion outward is through kinship; however, the family unit is not well defined in China. Family members in China can include the extended family while Western families generally only include immediate family members (Fei, 1992). This family-based structure has great influence on decision-making. Decisions are made based on vertical relationships between the self and the elder rather than horizontal relationships such as the wife and husband. The child sometimes has influence over

the parents' eating decisions. For example, a mother that dislike American fast food often took her daughter to eat there, and eventually she began to enjoy the food as well (Yan, 1997).

Eating with family, friends, and work colleagues is an important part of building informal relationships that can develop into more formal relationships (Hackley & Dong, 2001). The practice of dining out can strengthen existing social bonds, and develop new social relationships. To maintain group harmony, individuals make consumption choices within food consumption norms determined by social groups, including friends and family. Some Chinese people do not mind eating foreign foods as long as harmony is maintained (Chang et al, 2010). It is important to maintain this web of social relationships while eating so recommendations from friends and family members can influence the individual decision. Colleagues at work affect food consumption patterns because they may eat with fellow employees to maintain group harmony (Kittler & Sucher, 1989). Eating is a place to socialize as many Chinese consumers come to socialize or study at American fast food restaurants (Watson, 1997; Yan, 1997). The modern environment suggests a modern environment, much like the elegant coffee shop Starbucks, where friends and young couples can hang out for some time. Chinese people have been observed to hang out at fast food restaurants from 30 minutes to several hours (Watson, 1997; Yan, 1997).

The Chinese social influence is evident in the way food is traditionally shared among Chinese friends and family members. Chinese people will order or prepare communal dishes for everyone to share, utilizing their own chopsticks (Dewald, 2002). It is cultural practice for Chinese people to use their own chopsticks to grab food from the communal plates. Shared plate eating is a universal practice developed from a complex set of rules and behaviors (Goldschmidt, 1966). Shared plate eating refers to foods presented to two or more individuals on a single bowl

or plate and are shared among the group. In contrast, the American style of ordering is for individual plates per person. Research has examined shared plate eating within the household, but there is limited qualitative data available on how Chinese people perceive individual plating. Individual plates appear to be more hygienic than shared plates, which could symbolize modern eating habits. Little is known on its connection, which will be further explored in the study.

Consumer Identity

Consumption behavior has been established as an important medium for expressing class position and cultural identity (Bourdieu, 1984; Fieldhouse, 1986; Finkelstein, 1998; Khan, 1981; Longue, 1991; Quinn, 2005; Rozin, 1996; Watson, 1997; Yan, 1997). People express their status and class position through their consumption patterns; art, home décor, photography, and even food preferences distinguish social class membership (Bourdieu, 1984). The capacity to make consumption choices from available alternatives suggests that people have social mobility, and people with lower annual incomes are limited by capacity. Even the idea that people have certain preferences and make selections is a middle class concept because it presupposes that the individual has available choices. People can distinguish others' social position by their consumption patterns. Through an individualization process, people establish their identity by their consumption patterns (Bauman, 1988; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). The freedom to make consumption choices fosters individualization, and this individualization becomes an extension of their identity (Yan, 2010).

Bourdieu (1984) examined consumption patterns as a method to measure how people perceived their class position. While he mentioned food preferences as one of the ways to distinguish social class membership, he did not produce empirical results regarding food consumption and how it establishes a person's identity. Several researchers built on his

framework that describes the use of food that represents more than a substance that meets physiological needs. For example, the human use of food is more than simply nutrients because humans also use food symbolically (Kittler & Sucher, 1989). This symbolic use of food is unique to cultural practices by ethnic groups. Eating patterns, like other cultural practices and traditions, is a daily reaffirmation of cultural identity (Kittler, & Sucher, 1989). Cultural beliefs and cultural representation will be shaped by repeated contact under a process of acculturation. It is not enough to know what people are exposed to, but also how they internalize that information (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992). Previous studies established how food consumption represents their cultural values and identity.

The cultural model provides a cognitive schema learned in specific cultural contexts that motivate action (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Quinn & Holland, 1987). At the highest level are schemas with concept goals such as acceptance and status. The goal can trigger an action to fulfill it, such as eating at Western restaurants or even American fast food restaurants. Eating is a lower level schema, but to be seen at these restaurants can signify that people have attained a level of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Kim, Eves, & Scarles, 2009). Cultural capital refers to accumulated cultural knowledge that portrays status. The status can provide distinction between class members in a hierarchal society (Bourdieu, 1984; D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992).

Many Chinese consumers use foreign brands as status symbols because it creates a boundary between the people who can afford the premium and those that cannot (Finkelstein, 1998). It represents a modern dining experience that appeals to the Chinese consumer. However, a larger percentage of Chinese people eat fast food to save time rather than to save money (Anderson & He, 1999). Modernity has come to symbolize a variety of meanings, which include safety, convenience, familiarity, cleanliness, and connectedness (Watson, 1997). However,

American fast food is now affordable for the working class as well and the new Chinese middle class is no longer restricted to basic needs (Kivela & Johns, 2003; Watson, 1997). For example, the McDonald's restaurants in Hong Kong have a new consumer culture catered to trendy status seekers. American fast food exports popular culture to East Asia through its dining experience so food consumption extends beyond fulfilling physiological needs. Food consumption styles are not immune to globalization patterns as people integrate themselves into the modern society by their consumption styles (Warde, 1997). Eating at McDonald's has become an ordinary experience that has blended into the Hong Kong landscape (Watson, 1997). American fast food restaurants not only sell food, but also a modern dining experience. Modernity has come to symbolize a variety of meanings, which include predictability, safety, convenience, familiarity, sanctuary, cleanliness, modernity, and connectedness (Watson, 1997). The modern dining experience appeals to the Chinese consumer (Finkelstein, 1998).

Japanese consumers adopted many American dining practices because they portrayed the U.S. as a country where social hierarchies did not exist (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1997). Unlike traditional dining practices in East Asia, the menus are standardized and often are moderately priced meals compared to lavish dishes in East Asia. In East Asia, diners would compete with neighboring tables by ordering more lavish dishes. There is an overall consistency at American fast food restaurants where the menus, management staff, and service operate in the same manner. People recognize the identity, both as a modern environment, but also an environment without social hierarchies. For risk-avoidant consumers, brand consistency can provide comfort and familiarity. This familiarity can benefit the Chinese people because they know what to expect when they walk into an American fast food restaurant. The standardized menus and operations make it easy for repeat customers to order. There is a branding consistency even with

regional discrepancies in preference. However, contradicting research shows that American fast food is also affordable for the working class in urban areas (Kivela & Johns, 2003; Watson, 1997). The standard of living has risen so the people eating at McDonald's may not feel the sense of a higher status.

American fast food has regional differences, but remains much the same in various international locations. Watson (1997) argues that the first generation of Hong Kong consumers frequented McDonald's for its American appeal. It did not want to associate with the Chinese or Hong Kong's postcolonial identity (Watson, 1997). Hong Kong's McDonald's restaurant in its first few years maintained traditional American food items. Almost two decades later, Hong Kong consumers perceived fast food items such as the Big Mac, fries, and Coke as local products, defined in this sense as domestic rather than international. Even the term American fast food is ambiguous because it sells food that originated from other countries. For example, hamburger and French fries are not American in origin (Kittler & Sucher, 1989). Hamburgers came from the German city of Hamburg where they introduced chopped beefsteaks to the U.S. The Irish brought the potato to the U.S. in 1719, and the term French fries first appeared in the 1860s (Kittler & Sucher, 1989).

Both American fast food and Chinese people adapt to the different cultures when they come into contact. The process of change can occur both ways as American fast food adapts to local practices and preferences while remaining a foreign entity. Hong Kong's McDonald's originally maintained its foreign character by displaying the word McDonald's in English. It was later transliterated into Chinese characters based on homophonic characters. On the other hand, KFC translated the restaurant's name to Hometown Chicken in Chinese, but was later changed for homophonic sounds.

McDonald's finds local suppliers and partners to merge into the local culture while still symbolizing the American culture (Yan, 1997). This localization process of American restaurants attempts to blend into the local setting, yet still maintains its distinct American identity. The industry has adapted to the local variety and appeased the Chinese palates by incorporating traditional Chinese food items, familiar flavors, and cooking methods. The process of localization at KFC includes a modified menu, and it includes preserved Sichuan pickle, shredded pork soup, mushroom rice, tomato and egg soup, and traditional Peking chicken roll (China Today, 2004). American fast food menus in China are appealing to Chinese palates by adding traditional Chinese food items and flavors. American fast food menus have adapted to the local variety, which makes it difficult to determine how Chinese people perceive local and foreign products.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this exploratory study was to understand perceptions about food consumption American fast food in Beijing. I wanted to explore consumption patterns in a cultural context. The data collection was completed during the summer in 2011. I conducted 40 semi-structured interviews between June and July 2011 in Beijing, China. As of 2011, American fast food restaurants in Beijing were growing within the Chinese consumer market and part of the urban culture (Waldmeir, 2011). McDonald's restaurants were packed with young friends and couples hanging out and socializing (Watson, 1997). In this exploratory study, the effects of adopting American fast food developed new knowledge about consumer perceptions in a growing Chinese society.

Existing literature informed the development of the statement of the problem and the specific research objectives. Although my original research proposal contained four objectives, after initial interviews in Beijing, I had to adjust my research to three objectives. In particular, I altered my goals to explore Chinese ideas about hygiene and brand familiarity to focus on the perceptions about cultural identity of certain food items. I had noticed that informants were familiar with American brands, yet sometimes associated certain food items as Chinese food, rather than American food. Hence the three objectives that guided my research endeavors are as follows; I wanted to examine Chinese taste preferences and perceptions about the nutritional value of food, both Chinese and American fast food. This can affect how they their bodies feel after eating the food. Secondly, I aimed to study the effects of social relationships on food consumption habits. Food can be the center of social relationships, which can influence eating

choices. My third goal was, as introduced above, to understand how Chinese informants perceived the cultural identity from the consumption of American fast food.

For this study, I expected age and gender differences regarding consumption patterns. I hypothesized that younger informants are more likely to enjoy the taste of American fast food and eat there more often, reach the point of satiety, and consider American fast food as a formal meal rather than a snack. I expected the attitudes towards American fast food's nutritional value would be the same for informants of all ages, and that Chinese food is healthier than American fast food. Furthermore, I hypothesized that younger informants are more likely than an older informants to eat American fast food based on social influence rather than personal decision. I assumed that they could use the restaurant environment as a place to socialize. In terms of sharing, I anticipated that younger informants associate sharing of plates with low levels of hygiene. Finally, I hypothesized that younger informants are more likely than older informants to perceive American fast food as part of the typical, Chinese landscape. I assumed that younger informants are more likely to eat American fast food because it is fashionable and trendy.

Site selection

The semi-structured interviews were conducted around various locations, such as homes, offices, restaurants, and public areas, in Beijing. Beijing is the capital and a major metropolis in northern China. As a political center, it has attracted foreign food influences over the years. Beijing was the first city in China to offer American fast food restaurants as a dining option. This study builds on previous Beijing-specific studies about foreign food consumption habits. I would expect similar results in select urban Chinese cities, such as Shanghai and Guangzhou. There are also practical reasons for selecting Beijing as the site for my interviews. My friends and family there facilitated my stay.

Sampling Strategy

I used a purposive sampling strategy for my interviews (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Johnson & Weller, 2002). Purposive sampling is appropriate since the study aims to explore an understanding rather than to generalize findings to a large population (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2000). I intentionally wanted a variety of informants across age and gender so I can get a balanced perspective on food consumption. To interview additional informants that met the sampling frame, I employed a snowball sampling method. About two-thirds of the informants were recommended to me from a previous informant. The informants were selected to meet age and gender in the sampling frame. Although occupation was not part of the sampling frame, it can be considered as a third criterion. The informants were selectively selected as middle-class, urban Beijing residents.

The age group consists of two categories; younger informants exposed to American fast food restaurants during their childhood and adolescent periods and older informants that were not exposed to it. The age range for younger and older informants were based on the year KFC entered Beijing's market and the age of informants as of 2011. For a younger informant, the age ranged from 18 to 30. Since the interview instrument included questions about decision-making, no children were interviewed. Parents have influence over their children (Fei, 1992). I wanted to set a minimum age at 18, a legal adult in China for most purposes. As of 2011, they would have been exposed to American fast food restaurants their entire lives, if they lived in Beijing. I selected 30 as the upper range because they would have first seen their first American fast food restaurants as a 6 year old. At this age, they were still in their childhood period when American fast food first opened. The older informants ranged from 40 to 80. To avoid informants that were exposed to American fast food during their early teenage years, I wanted the informants to have

a more established diet. As of 2011, informants at age 40 were born in 1971. They would have been 16 before American fast food was first introduced in Beijing.

In Table 1 below, there were 10 younger male informants, 8 older male informants, 15 younger female informants, and 7 older female informants. The informants' occupation included graduate students (n=11), office employees (n=11), retail employees (n=11), and retirees (n=5). All graduate students were younger informants and retirees were older informants. Retail employees were mostly young women. Office employees were the most diverse group, a mix by age and gender.

Table 1. Sampling Frame in Beijing

	Men	Women	Total
Younger (Age 18-30)	10	15	25
Older (Age 40-80)	8	7	15
Total	18	22	40

Data Collection

I traveled and spent time around China for three weeks before I started my interviews. I wrote down field notes through participant observation (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). I ate at KFC and McDonald's restaurants, Chinese restaurants and food vendors to experience the eating culture. My perceptions about the eating culture changed with the length of stay as I became immersed into the local culture. I continued to learn about the eating habits and preferences of Beijing residents.

This exploratory research study used semi-structured interviews to elicit perceptions about American fast food. I used semi-structured interviews to cover a list of questions and topics (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). I asked each informant a set of open-ended questions to explain certain responses and beliefs. Of Taiwanese descent myself, the informant had a choice to be

interviewed in Mandarin Chinese or American English. All of the informants selected Chinese as the interview language. In addition, I employed a native Beijing graduate student, working in the social science survey department at Peking University, to examine each question. She checked the accuracy of the translations from English to Chinese for the interviews. We needed to retain the meaning of the questions to elicit the right responses. We also worked to improve the questions by removing any biases. The interview instrument is attached in Appendix A. Before every interview, I received the informant's permission to complete the interviews with signed IRB documentation forms, attached in Appendix B. All answers recorded remain anonymous and strictly confidential. I asked demographic questions to validate that the informants have met the sampling criteria. However, the informants were not assigned any identifiers and remained anonymous. I recorded and transcribed each interview. The length of the interviews ranged between 30 minutes to 90 minutes and averaged about 45 minutes. For about two-thirds of the interviews, the informants introduced another informant that met the sampling criteria.

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interview instrument produced both qualitative and quantitative data. In this exploratory study, I used inductive research methods to search for patterns within the text created by the interview transcripts (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). They yielded words and text that described the informants' eating habits and attitudes toward American fast food. The research concepts and hypotheses informed the analysis of this study. I used a grounded theory approach developed originally by Glaser and Strauss (1968). Rather than use a preexisting theoretical framework for this exploratory research, the ground theory approach developed insights about the content of interview text by looking for themes in the transcriptions. The consistency in certain responses led to themes and specific human behavior (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). The

interview transcriptions were coded for themes by highlighting through the data. I sorted the codes within the interview transcripts by themes and found relationships and patterns between the items.

Both the themes and the demographic information were converted into variables in SPSS 19.0 Statistical Software. The software produced frequency data for the codes and content they represented, and relevant frequency data were summarized within the results. Then, the variables were examined using a Pearson's chi-squared test for observed and expected results. Results with at least a 95% confidence interval were considered significant. Both significant and insignificant results across age, gender, and occupation were recorded. Then I synthesized the data and interpreted the results in the discussion.

Reflection

Being aware about my own biases, values, and attitudes, I used an emic perspective to reduce known subjective bias. The emic perspective is the viewpoint of an insider to the culture. This gave the informants with more power to voice their opinion about the subjective matter. The interviews were guided by specific research concepts, but the descriptors were based on the informants' personal views. New patterns emerged because their responses were not limited to previous literature or to my extent of knowledge. Informants reported insights within a specific cultural context that were not previously embedded within the research question. With a guided conversation, it can generate more meaningful responses within the urban Beijing culture. The interview conversations were natural, yet focused on specific topics. Trends and patterns developed, which made it easier to compare and contrast responses. The inductive approach led to a general understanding about food consumption patterns through interpretation.

Significance of Study

As American fast food restaurants capture overseas markets, new franchises will inevitably open throughout China. To be successful in the long-term, the franchises must adapt to Chinese preferences of the new generation. This exploratory study will benefit American fast food restaurants as the corporate management teams make key decisions regarding its franchises and restaurants. They can include menu items that suit the taste palatability of Chinese consumers and foods that are perceived as healthy to Chinese consumers. It goes beyond food preferences and into the fundamental thought in eating patterns. It breaks down the eating patterns by three major parameters, by age, gender, and occupation. Making strategic decisions on food menus or practices based on data will also benefit Chinese consumers. They will enjoy the food while avoiding negative health externalities such as obesity and other diseases.

CHAPTER 4: FOOD CONSUMPTION ATTITUDES IN BEIJING

Introduction

My observations of fast food restaurants in Beijing on different days of the week and during different time slots reveal that more than three quarters of the patrons seem to be under the age of 40. Informants reported that they do not crave American fast food items and considered it unhealthy. Viewpoints about the quality of American style fast food in comparison to traditional Chinese food differ by gender. Men described that Chinese cuisine has more cooking methods than American fast food while women described the lack of vegetables found in American fast foods. Age and occupation are not significant variables on choice of food consumption for either American style fast food or Chinese food.

Lunch and dinner partners influence eating decisions because the informants eat for reasons other than food. Age and occupation make differences in the choice of eating location. The tight time schedule that some businesses require from their employees influence eating decisions. Younger informants such as students and employees of local businesses and corporations eat at school or company cafeterias, and at restaurants with friends and colleagues. The older informants eat inside their own homes. Interestingly, the circumstances of the informants' first visit to an American fast food restaurant differ by occupation. Graduate students and retail employees are more likely to have been taken to a fast food restaurant by someone else, such as a friend or a family member. Retirees and office employees are more likely to make a personal decision to sample American fast food. Sharing food maintains group harmony, and the food becomes the center of the conversation.

Food consumption behavior reflects the urban cultural identity, as American style fast foods have become part of the urban setting. The identity of some products is less clear because

Chinese companies imitate the success of American style fast food restaurants, from its food to its operations. The American dining experience symbolizes modernity, represented by fast, scientific, and convenient food and clean restaurants. There is some backlash among informants against modern food items, such as the use of fillers and hormonal injections in the food. The impression of convenience and fast is not necessarily better is prevalent in Beijing, especially in reference to food consumption. This study confirms that Chinese people prefer natural food. In the following sections, I will discuss the findings of my research in detail.

Taste Preferences and Nutrition

There are two factors that influence food consumption habits, taste preferences and nutrition value. First, Chinese people are persistent about eating foods that are familiar to them so I expected to see differences between younger and older informants' taste preferences (Chang et al., 2010; Wright et al., 2001). Over half (n=22) of the 40 informants enjoy the taste of American fast food. Age does not influence the enjoyment of American fast food. This might be related to the fact that American fast food restaurants have had a presence in Beijing and other selected Chinese cities for more than two decades (Rooney, 2010; Waldmeir, 2011). However, younger informants visit American fast food restaurants more frequently than older informants. This observation is significant at $\chi^2(3, N = 40) = 8.32, p = .040$, analyzed using a Pearson's chi-squared test. For consumption behavior, 12 of 40 informants eat at American fast food restaurants at least once a week, 26 eat there at least once a month, and 38 informants eat there at least once a year.

Even after two decades, none of the informants crave American fast food on a daily basis. The cooking methods, ingredients and flavors in Chinese cuisine suit Chinese palates much better. When given the choice to select a Chinese or foreign foods, informants select Chinese

food. Informants reported that they adapted to eat American fast food, such as burgers, chicken nuggets, corn, French fries, and ice cream, and feel full afterwards. Some informants have made it a habit to replace a few traditional Chinese meals a few times per month with American fast food. American fast food has become a viable meal option rather than just a snack for Chinese people. Almost all (n=36) of the 40 informants feel full after eating American fast food until the next meal.

In terms of palate adaptations, the informants enjoy certain food items that they may not have enjoyed before. They learn to eat new foods over time due to frequent exposure and just a little over half (n=21) of the 40 informants are willing to sample any type of food. Informants reported avoiding certain animals or certain fat from meats. None of the informants explicitly reported to avoid cheese and some informants even enjoy eating cheese and dairy products. This is a significant finding because Chinese people disliked cheese in a study on Chinese people's evaluation of McDonald's restaurant conducted in 1994 (Yan, 1997). During that time period, cheese was a foreign food item and it was popularized through American fast food restaurants. Age is not a significant factor regarding sampling new or foreign foods. However, there is a tendency that older informants are more likely than younger informants to sample any food. I expected older informants as less likely to sample foreign foods, especially cheese. There is also a tendency that men are more likely than women to sample any food.

Informants perceived American fast food restaurants alter their ingredients and menu items to appeal to Chinese palates. They assumed that the food served in China may taste different compared to fast food from the same restaurant chain in the U.S. The breakfast and lunch menu at KFC appeal to Chinese informants because it includes Chinese food items such as rice and pork. They change the menu items and ingredients to localize its food as a marketing

strategy (Watson, 1997). Also, the informants assumed that McDonald's restaurants slightly tinker with their ingredients to appeal to Chinese palates.

This study elicited how the informants perceived what was healthy about Chinese and American fast food. Although there is no age difference, 14 of 40 informants said that American fast food is healthy and 34 of 40 informants said that Chinese food is healthy. There is a tendency that younger informants are more likely than older informants to describe Chinese food as healthier than American fast food. Further research is necessary to solidify this observation and find explanations for it.

Two major patterns emerged regarding the food's nutritional value when comparing Chinese cuisine and American fast food. First, the informants strongly associate American fast food with the deep-frying cooking method. Almost two-thirds (n=27) of the 40 informants mentioned that American fast food was either considered oily, greasy, or fatty. There is a tendency for younger informants to mention grease and fat when describing American fast food. Older informants are more likely to associate that aspect of American fast food directly with their idea of junk food.

“In China, we have a saying called 垃圾食品 [lā jī shí pǐn]. This means that it's junk food” (Male informant, 78 years old).

Informants linked the deep-frying method used by American fast food restaurants and the body feeling of fat and grease. There is a tendency that men are more likely than women to feel better after eating American fast food. However, these tendencies are not statistically significant. Further research is necessary to test the relationships. There is no difference by age regarding body experience after eating American fast food.

The informants reported that Chinese cuisine has more variety in its cooking methods. Cooking methods include steaming, boiling, stir-frying, and stewing, which the informants perceive as healthier ways to prepare food. Men are more likely than women to describe that Chinese food is healthier because it has more cooking methods than American fast food. The observations are significant at $\chi^2 (1, N = 40) = 6.23, p = .015$. It seems that Chinese people evaluate the nutritional value of food not necessarily based on ingredients, but on how it is prepared and cooked.

“The difference is not necessarily the ingredients or the food, but rather the way it’s cooked. In the West and specifically American fast food, the majority of the available food is deep-fried.” (Male informant, 60 years old).

Informants reported that Chinese food has a greater variety of ingredients, such as soy products and vegetables. Balancing various ingredients, especially vegetables are considered important in a formal meal. In Chinese cuisine, informants mentioned, a formal meal consists of a grain such as rice or noodles along with two dishes. It is typically a vegetable and a meat dish. Women are also more likely to mention Chinese variety in ingredients when describing healthy food. The observations are significant at $\chi^2 (1, N = 40) = 4.36, p = .038$.

When describing American fast food, over one-third (n=14) of the 40 informants attribute the lack of vegetables to their verdict of less healthy food. The type of vegetables in American fast food cuisines is limited to the lettuce and tomato found in burgers, which are raw. Pizza Hut restaurants offer salads. There is a slight tendency that women are more likely than men to mention salads as a healthy option when eating American fast food. However, the salads are raw. Chinese people have not found raw and cold foods to be acceptable meals (Watson,

1997). They prefer cooked vegetables, which makes it a fundamental difference between American and Chinese meals.

“Chinese food is healthy because everything is cooked and the high heat will eliminate any diseases. Americans eat a lot of raw, uncooked foods” (Male informant, 25 years old).

In general, graduate students are more concerned about a balanced diet. Some of the informants explained that they avoided American fast food because of its high calorie, dietary fat. They attribute the fact that Chinese people are getting heavier as a result of eating American style fast food. Women in particular described going on diets and skipping meals to maintain a low body weight. Evidently, eating American fast food is not considered to help with that body image.

Social Influence on Eating Habits

Social relationships play a role in eating habits, such as the decision-making process in eating location and food. While only 22 of the 40 informants reported the taste of American fast food suits their palates, 26 of 40 informants eat at American fast food restaurants at least once a month of which 12 informants eat there at least once a week. The number of informants who eat at American fast food restaurants regardless of their taste preference is larger than the number of informants who actually enjoy the food. This is not significant by age, gender, or occupation, and it would require further tests to examine the relationships. There is a tendency that they visit American fast food restaurants for social reasons rather than the food. This suggests that some informants visit fast food restaurants for reasons other than for the food. Friends can socialize and hang out at American fast food restaurants.

Choice of eating location for lunch or dinner is reportedly influenced by dinner or lunch partners. When eating out, 11 of 40 informants mentioned that friends make decisions, 7

informants mentioned that family members make decisions, and 5 informants mentioned that they let the guest make the decisions. Several informants reported that it depends on the situation. The informants recalled their very first experience eating at an American fast food restaurant. Some informants explained that they passed by fast food restaurants and were curious to try it. However, the majority of the informants let someone else make the decision to sample foreign food. Almost two-thirds (n=25) of the 40 informants were taken to an American fast food restaurant the very first time by someone else.

Both age and occupation influence the choice of eating location because of the time constraints. The informants' working schedules limited their options. Graduate students usually eat at the campus cafeteria with other friends while office and retail employees eat with colleagues in groups at either the cafeteria or restaurants. Retirees do not have time restrictions, but often eat at home since it is convenient. Eating behavior is largely determined by the convenience of a group.

For the 35 informants that reported they eat breakfast everyday, about half eat breakfast at home and the other half elsewhere. When eating elsewhere, they split the choice between eating at a cafeteria and a food vendor on the street. Age makes a difference on choosing a location to eat breakfast. Younger informants eat breakfast outside their home, such as company or school cafeteria, or a local shop. Older informants eat breakfast at home instead of eating out. This observation is significant at $\chi^2 (1, N = 40) = 6.14, p = .046$. Occupation has a tendency to influence breakfast location. Further research is necessary to test the relationships between occupation and breakfast location.

The informants' eating habits are similar for both lunch and dinner. Both age and occupation make a significant difference on the choice of eating location. When selecting a place

to eat, 35 of 40 informants eat at a cafeteria or restaurant based on convenience. This convenience means a clean place that allows them to socialize. The 5 informants that eat at home are all retirees. Age makes a significant difference for lunch $\chi^2(1, N = 40) = 9.52, p = .005$ and dinner $\chi^2(2, N = 40) = 13.69, p = .001$. People with a job in office and retail are more likely to eat out than in. Graduate students also eat out because they are constrained to a few options. Occupation makes a difference on the choice of eating location for both lunch $\chi^2(4, N = 40) = 40.0, p = .000$ and dinner $\chi^2(8, N = 40) = 24.82, p = .002$. Proximity and convenience is important for graduate students, office, and retail employees. They go to lunch or dinner in groups, which means that they sometimes follow the wishes of others.

Eating with friends and family means different food items and conversation topics. Almost half ($n=18$) of the informants mentioned food as a reason for the difference between eating with friends and eating with family. Graduate students are more likely than other informants in the sample to perceive differences, such as food items and conversation topics, between eating with friends and family members. Retail employees are least likely to find differences. This observation is significant at $\chi^2(12, N = 40) = 22.12, p = .036$. Younger informants are limited in food choices when they eat with family. They avoid foreign foods, such as American style fast food and only eat traditional Chinese food because family members do not enjoy the taste of American fast food. They are also concerned about the nutritional value of food, which meant that certain food items are off-limits in the presence of parents.

Informants reported that they prefer to share communal dishes as a Chinese habit. It is interesting because this gave them a greater variety in food. The food is at the center of the conversations and conversation topics are different between friends and family. Younger informants reported that eating with family members meant a more quiet meal with conversation

topics relating back to the food or the daily activities, while conversation topics were filled with laughter when eating with friends. In contrast, there are more rules when they eat at home, especially when there are elders involved. The elders are seated first and sit on the inside to show respect. The seating arrangement is important because someone sitting on the outside means that the person must help service if anything is needed. There are no rules when eating with friends with a strong affective relationship among them. For example, younger informants could eat anything and as much as they wanted to eat. They did not have to finish all the food on the plate. They can talk about anything with friends about a variety of topics. Although there is more laughter and freedom when eating with friends, some informants prefer to eat with family.

“It’s more interesting when the food is shared. I really like the Chinese style of eating. We can discuss about the food together” (Female informant, 24 years old).

American style fast food serves individually portioned meals. However, the informants retain certain traditional Chinese habits when they eat American style fast food. Over half (n=21) of the 40 informants share food items between group members and each person will order something different so they have a greater variety of food. They share French fries and chicken nuggets with close friends and family members. Informants explained that they could get the greatest variety in food at the cheapest cost. The meal fulfills a hunger, but also maintains a social connection.

Modern Food Consumption

Informants eat at American fast food restaurants because it is convenient. They are nearly everywhere in Beijing and it provides a dining option for younger consumers. They reported that American fast food restaurants provide a place to eat that is clean, which was also reported by Beijing residents in the 1990s (Yan, 1997). The facilities have air conditioning during the

summer and heating in the winter. The younger informants eat with friends and it is a place to hang out and socialize.

The informants also mentioned that they dislike food adulterations, for both American fast food and Chinese food. The foods are moving away from traditional, agricultural practices towards more processed, factory made food, which concerns them. Informants describe hearing on the news about deformities in animals use by American fast food restaurants, specifically chickens. This has decreased the appetite for chicken in American fast food restaurants since they are concerned about what they put into their bodies. They complain about the use of fillers and fertilizers on food and prefer fresh, natural foods. This applies to both American fast food and Chinese food. However, the taste, smell, and aroma for Chinese food still take priority over natural foods.

The modified ingredients and local manufacturing plants make the identity of American products less clear. For example, there are disagreements among informants regarding the origin of Coca-Cola. The informants assume that they drink Chinese Cola. Coca-Cola is a distinct American product, but only a little over half (n=21) of the 40 informants consider Cola to be an exclusively American product. Surprisingly, seven informants considered Cola to be a Chinese product while some informants think it is both American and Chinese. Informants described that the popularity of Coca-Cola has led to the imitation of Cola and local companies create their own version of Cola. Some of the informants dislike McDonald's and KFC Cola, but enjoy Chinese Cola.

“I don't really like KFC or McDonald's cola, I like Chinese cola” (Female informant, 25 years old).

The fast-paced, urban lifestyle has made American fast food restaurants a common sight in the urban landscape. Beyond meeting physiological needs, American fast food restaurants also symbolize American cultural values. Informants are familiar with the quick service provided by certain brands. They know what to expect at any of the fast food restaurants across Beijing and select cities in China. It provides a clean place to eat and socialize for young consumers. The informants generally prefer Chinese food if the decision were based on the food alone. However, taste preferences and perceived nutritional value can be influenced by social factors among young, trendy consumers. American fast food restaurants have become an integral part of the modern Chinese culture as a place to eat and socialize. The cultural interaction between American fast food and Chinese people developed new eating habits.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Fast Food Culture in China

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, American fast food restaurants have had an increasing presence in Beijing and urban cities throughout China. Over time, American fast food restaurants carved a niche in its consumer dining market. Any of the American fast food restaurants reach near maximum seating capacity, day or night. With a population with more expendable income, Beijing residents have the ability to eat there more often. They generally eat there a few times a month and hesitate to eat there more often. They still prefer traditional Chinese food when given the choice because it suits their palates much better. The presence of American fast food in the urban landscape for two decades had little influence on eating patterns. Findings point to few differences by age as younger informants eat and enjoy American fast food only slightly more times than older informants. Some of the older informants eat American fast food more often than before and thereby narrow the gap in consumption patterns. However, the influence from parents controlled their son or daughter's eating habits and preferences.

Since there is little difference by age, this suggests that American fast food exposure during early childhood and adolescent periods only had a small influence within Chinese families. Parents often limit fast food consumption because they simply do not like the food, which makes the presence of fast food restaurants during childhood irrelevant. Younger informants do not eat American fast food with their parents because of the parents' preferences towards traditional Chinese cuisine. Older informants have already established eating habits and are hesitant to change so they probably did not take them there often. Consumption patterns extend beyond taste preferences, and into the perceived nutrition value of the food and its effects on the body.

Childhood exposure to American fast food did not establish strong eating patterns because parents decide that certain foods with poor nutritional value or are high in fat calories are off-limits. Younger informants generally only eat American fast food with their peers and not with their parents. The strong relationship, or *guanxi*, meant that developed consumption patterns have already been established since a young age. They may simply know that their parents prefer to eat traditional Chinese food, and this relationship can be applied to friends and peers as well. When eating with friends, parents have less control over their nutrition. This gives them more food choices since they tend to eat fast food or snacks in moderation. They eat more snacks like ice cream, traditional Chinese snacks from street vendors, or French fries. There are not any restrictions per se, but informants are still conscious about what they put into their bodies. Therefore, they will limit fast food consumption to stay healthy.

Chinese informants explained a major reason for limiting American fast food consumption was due to the potential weight gain even if they enjoyed the taste. The mass media and advertisers have portrayed women to be ultra-slim. Advertisers use slim women to market their products, which have put pressure on women to stay slim. News reports influences Beijing informants as they often restrict certain foods products, whether they are American fast food or Chinese food and drink products. Receiving negative news reports about certain foods and drinks can affect consumption patterns for both men and women. The Chinese informants are concerned about weight gain because they mention the reports that link American fast food and weight gain. The effect of mass media on consumption patterns is unknown in China and it requires further research.

They perceive American fast food to be high in calories and fat. There is some truth to it because controlling for various factors such as gender, body size, calorie intake and daily

activities, the average American diet lead to weight gain (Campbell & Campbell, 2004). Women are especially concerned about the link between American fast food menu items and weight gain, which can lead to eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia. A few women in my study explain that they have attempted to lose weight by eating less or skipping meals. Even in my observations in shopping malls, fast food restaurants, and other locations in Beijing, women constantly talk about their body image and what they put into their bodies. Based on the Chinese informants, diet plays an important role determining body weight.

There are major health implications when consuming American fast food in large quantities. Dietary fat not only leads to more body fat, but increased risk of heart disease, high blood cholesterol, diabetes, breast and large bowel cancer (Campbell & Campbell, 2004). American diets high in animal protein can lead to cardiovascular diseases such as high blood pressure, stroke, and heart disease (Campbell & Campbell, 2004). In contrast, rural Chinese people eat more plant-based diets, with much less risks from these diseases (Campbell & Campbell, 2004). All of the informants restrict some American fast food items because of health concerns. Older informants are concerned about both their health as well as their family's health.

The two primary reasons Chinese informants perceive American fast food as unhealthy is the lack of vegetables and the use of the deep fryer. Women complain that American fast food lacks vegetables so the food items are not properly balanced. In contrast, men describe American fast food as unhealthy due to the lack of various cooking methods. The significant difference infers that men are more concerned about various cooking methods, such as steaming, stir-frying, stewing, and boiling. This suggests that women know less about cooking than previous generations and introduces the conclusion that gender roles are changing in respect to meal preparation. In the past, women's identity was defined by traditional domestic chores, such as

cooking. Understanding the family unit around food may reveal the transformation processes in the family and the family lifecycle. Women are part of the working force and spend less time cooking for the family. Women are on a path towards individualization in China to build their identity based on their achievements (Yan, 2010).

American values of individualization appeal to Chinese society, but the informants are still rooted to traditional Chinese group harmony. The informants will forego certain taste preferences to maintain group harmony. Confucianism philosophy about social order built on group harmony is central throughout Chinese society (Fei, 1992). American fast food dining style serves individually portioned meals while Chinese dining style traditionally used communal dishes that can be shared while they eat at a round table. In American fast food style dining, meals are ordered individually. Regardless of taste preferences, Chinese people prefer communal dishes. For example, the informants share fast food items such as French fries or chicken nuggets with close friends or family members, but will not share with new acquaintances and strangers. They do not share to avoid cross-contamination. Therefore, Chinese informants still perceive communal dishes as sanitary.

Shared dishes means a greater variety of food. More importantly, everyone can share the eating experience, which allows them to comment and talk about the food between friends and family members. The conversation is at the center of the dining experience and it is a place for laughter and conversation. Family members talked about the food and their day, but the conversation topic is more fun and interesting between friends. Eating with friends mean that they talk about anything. Informants eating with friends, colleagues, or their boss engage in *guanxi* maintenance. Eating also provides a place to develop newly formed social connections.

Since Chinese people traditionally share food among friends and family members, the host will usually impress the guest. They often eat better food, which meant more expensive cuisines.

Food consumption is a daily reaffirmation of cultural identity. The American dining experience has been described as modern, which appeals to the Chinese consumers. They are conveniently located near shopping malls, offices, and schools. They provide students and colleagues a place to eat during their set time schedules or while shopping on weekends. American fast food restaurants represent a modernization in dining practices, such as individualism, sanitation, convenience, familiarity, and connectedness (Watson, 1997; Yan, 2010). The menu items are standardized across its franchises and even the operations and staff remain consistent. Not only is it convenient, it also remains a quick-service restaurant that caters to urban dwellers. Although the quick service is an integral part of the American fast food dining experience, fast food is only part of the modern dining experience. In China, many quick-service restaurants and street-side vendors also provide food to Chinese consumers very quickly. The modernity appeal in American style fast food is that they provide its patrons a clean environment to socialize.

Modern food is branded as scientific because it uses engineered ingredients and processed foods to meet legal requirements, safety standards, shelf life, and other reasons. It is often consistent, which helps standardize its operations, staff, and menus worldwide. For example, sodas are produced using scientific formulas and many Chinese drink companies have imitated the success of Coca-Cola. Scientific food and drinks are engineered to appeal to taste palatability and disregard health concerns. American style fast food and drinks are tested for safety in the short-term although they are not necessarily healthy in the long-term. They worry

about unnatural foods and drinks. The carbonated soda is high in sugar and high-fructose corn syrup. Further research on the link between soda consumption and obesity is important.

Informants are worried about food adulterants because they are concerned about unforeseen health consequences from food additives. For their health, they will restrict food consumption if negative reports appear on the news. Several informants stopped eating American fast food after hearing about news reports of animal deformities, such as chicken with multiple wings. The modern approach towards food with food additives can turn away Chinese consumers. The informants described that the use of pesticide, fertilizer, and hormonal injections are considered unhealthy. They prefer foods that are natural, fresh, and seasonal.

Conclusion

Food is important to daily life because it brings family and friends together. It fulfills physiological needs and something more important, social needs. American fast style fast food is popular because it provides a modern environment for Chinese people to socialize and hang out. The Chinese lifestyle is changing towards a standardized, fast-paced world as it offers convenient food in a modern environment. Albeit the introduction of an American cuisine and dining style, Chinese informants prefer traditional Chinese style food consumption. This means communal dishes shared between friends and family members as well as eating traditional Chinese dishes. Chinese food suits their palates better and is perceived as much healthier than American fast food despite some menu changes to incorporate healthier fast food menu items. The globalization of food and drink products has long-term health consequences that spread on a global level. Chinese consumers eating fried foods, high in dietary fat and caloric count, can lead to obesity and health problems, as seen in regions with American style fast food diets. American

fast food franchises benefit from increased consumer purchases, but negative externalities include increasing obesity and health problems.

This exploratory research is only at the beginning. This research reveals the effects of adopting American fast food in an urban setting, but the success of the fast food industry is rapidly expanding outside the urban regions and into rural areas. Further research should study foreign food influences as it spreads in rural Chinese regions and its impacts. There are broader health implications when American style fast food penetrates smaller, rural towns in China. In a cultural context, American fast food restaurants have blended into the local landscape. However, rural China has been spared from the influx of American style fast food restaurants. Much like the ideological divide in the U.S. between urban and rural regions, there is an ideological divide in China between traditional, rural regions and urban areas such as Beijing. As the economy grows in China for the next decade, American style fast food and imitation restaurants will infiltrate additional parts of China. As the market saturates in the urban regions, they will conquer rural areas as the Chinese economy lifts people out of poverty. On the basis of the interviews and intuition shaped by this research study, there would be a similar consumption pattern if American fast food spreads into rural regions. More expendable income means the ability to make consumption choices. However, this is not just about food consumption, but consumption behavior in general as they adopt more western dining practices. Future studies should explore foods that are more suitable to Chinese palates and more importantly, healthier food items.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

Date	
Time	
Age Category	
Gender	
Occupation	

Imagine if you had a craving for American food, where would you get American food?

试想一下，如果你想去吃美式食品，你会想去哪里吃？

How often do you go to American fast food restaurants?

你多久会去吃一次美式快餐？

What comes to mind when I say American fast food? What do you usually eat?

当我谈及美式快餐的时候，你会想到哪些？你一般会吃哪些种类的？

What is your feeling towards Coke? Someone told me that they think Coke is a Chinese product. What do you think?

你对可乐什么感觉？有的人告诉我他们认为可是中国产品，你以为呢？

Describe the taste of American fast food. Imagine eating American fast food everyday.

请描述美式快餐的口味。试想一下每天都吃美式快餐。

Describe some foods that you will never try.

请描述你从来不会去尝试的食物。

What is healthy about American fast food?

你以为美式快餐哪些地方是健康的？

What is healthy about Chinese food?

你以为中国食物哪些地方是健康的？

Describe typical meals that make you feel full.

请描述一餐可以令你吃饱的饭。

How do you feel after eating American fast food?

吃完美式快餐你的感觉是怎么样的？

Where do you usually eat breakfast?

早餐你一般都在那里吃？

Where do you usually eat lunch?

午餐你一般都在那里吃？

Where do you usually eat dinner?

晚餐你一般都在那里吃？

Where do you eat snacks?

你一般都在哪里吃零食？

Describe who makes the decisions when you eat out.

当准备出去吃饭的时候，一般由谁来决定去哪里吃？

What is the difference between eating with friends and family?

与家人一起吃饭跟与朋友一起吃饭的区别是什么？

What kind of food is involved when socializing or studying?

当社交或者学习的时候，你一般会吃什么喝什么？

Who took you to your first American fast food restaurant and describe the event.

是谁带你第一次品尝美式快餐的？请描述一下当时的场景。

How often do you share American fast food items, such as French fries or chicken nuggets with others? Explain.

你会经常与他人一起分享某些美式快餐吗？比如薯条、鸡块？请解释。

Not worrying about taste, do you prefer sharing plates or eating individual plates?

不考虑口味，你是更喜欢跟他人一起分享食物，还是自己吃自己的

APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL DOCUMENT



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office
1L-09 Brody Medical Sciences Building • 600 Moyer Boulevard • Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914 • Fax 252-744-2284 • www.ecu.edu/irb

TO: Jerry Tsao, Graduate student, Dept. of International Studies, ECU
FROM: UMCIRB *kk*
DATE: April 28, 2011
RE: Expedited Category Research Study
TITLE: "Examining American Fast Food Consumption Patterns Among Chinese Consumers in Beijing"

UMCIRB #11-0268

This research study has undergone review and approval using expedited review on 4.26.11. This research study is eligible for review under an expedited category number 6 & 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this **unfunded** study **no more than minimal risk** requiring a continuing review in **12 months**. Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

The above referenced research study has been given approval for the period of **4.26.11** to **4.25.12**. The approval includes the following items:

- Internal Processing Form (received 4.19.11)
- Informed Consent: English (dated 4.19.11)
- Informed Consent: Chinese (received 4.26.11)
- Interview Instrument
- COI Disclosure Form (dated 4.19.11)

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

The UMCIRB applies 45 CFR 46, Subparts A-D, to all research reviewed by the UMCIRB regardless of the funding source. 21 CFR 50 and 21 CFR 56 are applied to all research studies under the Food and Drug Administration regulation. The UMCIRB follows applicable International Conference on Harmonisation Good Clinical Practice guidelines.