

Perception of food and locality among Chinese tourist experiences in Finland

F. Ma¹, X. Liu¹, C. Tikkanen-Kaukanen², [M. Särkkä-Tirkkonen](mailto:marjo.sarkka-tirkkonen@helsinki.fi)² & S. Mynttinen³

¹Key Laboratory of Natural Medicine and Immune-Engineering of Henan Province, College of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, Henan University, Kaifeng, 475004, China. Institution

²University of Helsinki, Ruralia Institute, marjo.sarkka-tirkkonen@helsinki.fi

³South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences, Patteristonkatu 2, 50100 Mikkeli, Finland

Implications

The study applies qualitative methods to reach a more in-depth understanding of Chinese tourists' relations to food during their visit to Finland. The main interest is to find out how they perceive food and tourism, local food, environmentally friendly food and organic food during their trip. The preliminary results show that the Finnish food and food culture is not familiar among Chinese tourists and they have difficulties to identify the local food in holiday destinations. Concept of organic food was better understood than environmentally friendly food. Attributes like healthy, safer, natural, green, expensive and luxury were associated to the organic food. Additionally, organic food was considered to fulfill high quality standards.

Background and objectives

The Chinese tourists have showed a growing interest for travel to the Nordic countries and the number of Chinese overnights has almost tripled since 2010. Especially the winter season has been quite popular (Wu, 2016). Chinese tourism expenditure in Finland has increased by +56 % in 2015 and an average Chinese tourist spends ca. 656 euros during their trip in Finland (Visit Finland, 2016). According to the recent reports, Chinese groups will be looking into in-depth travel and spend more time in one country/destination instead of multi countries/destinations as it has been so far (Lai, 2016). There will be more interest in good quality tours such as living better, eating better, seeking more fun and spending more time in exploring attraction sites. Chinese travelers also seem to be willing to experience the daily life of the locals and know more about local customs and cultures. The focus in this study is to gain understanding of Chinese tourists' relations to food during their visit to Finland.

Key results and discussion

According to this preliminary study the Chinese interviewees had money but no time to spend during their holidays in Finland. This phenomenon seem to be quite typical (Visit Finland, 2016). The lack of time affected e.g. what kind of food or meals they chose. Different kind of snack products were preferred or they made an easy choice to save time and visited Chinese or Japanese restaurants. Naturally this has an effect on the perception of the local food or on the Finnish food. Some of the snacks, like noodles, were even purchased in order to prevent homesickness. However, some of the respondents described that "traditional and original food" would be the first choice and preferred in the holiday destination. Traditional food, restaurants and small local food shops were seen as symbols of the Finnish culture in general. Especially younger interviewees trusted information and recommendations of local food found via internet or websites and used online travel advisers. In general locality was described "growing here and sold here" and most of the interviewees were willing to try local food products when travelling in Finland.

When asked about the meaning of the food itself, it was regarded to provide energy and nutrition and to maintain the health of the body. Importance of the water was pointed out and it was considered as food as well. On the other hand, attention was paid on the appealing appearance and how attractive way the dish was served. E.g. one interviewee mentioned experience with local fish meal, which was served in unpleasant way.

Environmental friendly food was not well understood by the Chinese interviewees. However, food waste and plastic food packages were brought out in this context. Concept of organic food was better understood. Attributes like healthy, safer, natural, green, expensive and luxury

were associated to the organic food. Additionally, organic food was considered to fulfill high quality standards.

As a conclusion it can be stated that the Chinese tourists are not familiar with the Finnish food and they have difficulties to identify the local food in holiday destinations. However, the Chinese tourists are skilled in using online travel advisers and seek for recommendation and additional information there. This kind of services were considered trustful and informative.

How work was carried out?

A qualitative method was chosen as the main research approach for this study, in order to get more in-depth understanding of Chinese tourists' perceptions of local food. The research material consists of fifteen semi-structured in-depth interviews. The thematic interviews were used to understand the perceptions of Chinese tourist on four themes, including food and tourism, locality, environmentally friendly food, and organic food. Interpretation of the interview data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Further, the meanings of the perceptions, the possible similarities and also the differences between the conceptions were analyzed. The interviews were coded using Atlas.ti 7 qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.ti 7, Version 7.5.10).

The interviews took place in hotels, lounges, cafeterias and online. 15 interviewees were participated in the separate interviews held during August 2016 to October 2016. The ages of the interviewees ranged from 18-60 years (12 females and 3 males). The interviews were conducted in Chinese by native Chinese interviewer, and took about 1-2 hours. All interviews were recorded, then transcribed and subsequently translated into English. Most of in-depth interviewees were found as travelling for leisure purpose, and some of them were interviewed using e.g. Skype after their trip in Finland.

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