



## Research article

# The dining experience of Beijing Roast Duck: A comparative study of the Chinese and English online consumer reviews



Jue Huang\*

College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHSS), United Arab Emirates University, United Arab Emirates

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## ABSTRACT

Currently research investigating travel dining experience from a cross-cultural perspective was limited. This study aimed to compare the domestic Chinese and foreign English-speaking customers' dining experience of Beijing Roast Duck, a specialty food representing the gastronomic identity of the local cuisine. By employing semantic network analysis of the online consumer reviews, the results identified three common dimensions perceived by both groups, including the food, the restaurant and the occasion for dining out, and the service encounter. However, the domestic and foreign customers differed in their orientation about the aspects of the service encounter that they cared about. They also showed substantial differences in their perception about value for money as well as the cultural and experiential nature of the meal. The study also attested to the utility of the semantic network analysis method to uncover the rich information contained in the vast user generated content online.

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## 1. Introduction

It is generally recognized that the role played by food and dining in tourism could be widely variant. In the minimal sense, it may be solely functional in which the food only serves the purpose of sustaining life, and is thus a mundane and supporting activity that enables travelers to engage in other tourism activities (Osman et al., 2014). On the other hand, dining may become an extraordinary experience that makes for a memorable trip (Chang et al., 2011). In this case, the food not only provides utmost gustatory and sensory satisfaction, the related experience also become a conduit to learn about the culture of a locality and to accrue cultural capital. To account for the complex relations that tourists have with food, similar conceptualization were proposed by Quan and Wang (2004), who divided food experiences into central (or peak) and peripheral (or supporting) roles in the holiday experience. In the post-modern society, the tourists' quest for authentic dining experience has given rise to the popularity of culinary or gastronomy tourism. It is a form of tourism wherein an opportunity for unique and memorable food and drink experiences contributes significantly to travel motivation and satisfaction (Ottenbacher and Harrington, 2013).

In spite of the acknowledgment that experiencing local culture through food and drink was part of the lived experience of international travelers (Means et al., 2015), empirical studies about travel dining was limited (Chang et al., 2011). There was little understanding about the meanings and practices related to food consumption in the holiday context, due to the early stage of the study in this area (Therkelsen, 2015). Currently few study has examined the visitors' dining experience from a cross-cultural perspective. Cuisine is by itself an expression of culture and a legacy passed on from one generation to another. Therefore, cross-cultural study possesses the potential to deepen our current understanding about the intersection of culture, food, and tourism. To partially fill the knowledge gap, the present study aimed to compare the domestic and foreign visitors' dining experience by employing a semantic network analysis (SNA) of the online customer review. With a case study of Quanjudu, one of the most famous time-honored restaurants that served the specialty food Beijing Roast Duck, the study aimed to achieve the following specific objectives.

- 1) To explore the dimensions of the domestic Chinese visitors' dining experiences at Quanjudu;
- 2) To explore the dimensions of the foreign English-speaking visitors' dining experiences at Quanjudu;
- 3) To compare the semantic networks of the domestic and foreign visitors' account of their dining experiences.

\* Corresponding author at: Maqam Campus, Building C1-0085, United Arab Emirates University, P.O. Box 15551, Al-Ain, United Arab Emirates.

E-mail address: [amyjueh@uaeu.ac.ae](mailto:amyjueh@uaeu.ac.ae)

The article was organized in the subsequent manner. It started with a review of extant literature related to dining experience, local food, and online user-generated content (UGC). Next, the background of Beijing Roast Duck and Quanjude was introduced. Third, the methods adopted in the study were delineated; and then the main empirical results were presented and discussed. Finally, the study concluded with the main theoretical and practical implications, and highlighted the methodological contribution made to the literature on food and tourism.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Travel dining experience and its influencing factors

Food provides tourists with a playful means for discovering the culture of a destination. In particular, the gastronomy of a locality, as a component of the intangible cultural heritage of a locality, reflects the local character and creates a sense of place (Gordin and Trabskaya, 2013). However, only until recent decades that the relationship between food and tourism has begun to receive attention by the academics (Sanchez-Cañizares and Castillo-Canalejo, 2015). Current study on food and tourism focused on several broad topics, including the definition and motivation for culinary or gastronomy tourism (e.g., Smith et al., 2010); tourists typology in terms of their approach to food at the destination (e.g., Cohen and Avieli, 2004); tourists' food consumption behavior at the destination (e.g., satisfaction, perception of local gastronomy) (e.g., Sanchez-Cañizares and Castillo-Canalejo, 2015); tourists' involvement in food and beverage related events and activities in destinations (e.g., wine tourism, food festivals) (e.g., Getz and Brown, 2006); and the role of food and cuisine in promoting destination image and development (e.g., Gordin and Trabskaya, 2013; Montanari and Staniscia, 2009).

Among these topics, dining experience has received considerable attention. This topic provides basic knowledge about customer behavior, which serves as the basis for tourism and culinary product development at both the destination and individual business levels. Recent research has identified three categories of factors that influenced the tourists' dining experience, including tourists' pre-trip expectation, personality typology, and cultural factors. First, customers' perception of the dining experience was shaped by their expectations, which were formed by customers' general knowledge and past dining experience, other people's experience, mass media (especially the social media in contemporary society), and the firm's marketing initiatives (Chang et al., 2011). Second, psychometric variables (such as extrovert and introvert, neophobic and neophylic tendencies) were also used to explain tourists' choices for familiar food or indigenous food embedded in the local culture (Therkelsen, 2015).

Thirdly, culture was recognized as an important factor that affected tourists' perception of travel dining experience. For example, Chang et al. (2011) found that tourists' own food culture and culinary precepts served as the basis for their evaluation of the local food at the destination. Sheldon and Fox (1988) investigated aspects of food service that were important for tourists when on vacation (e.g., price, value). The authors found that nationality influenced tourists' perception about food service at a destination. These findings implied that cultural difference was a variable that had the potential to explain a wide range of tourists' dining behavior. In the literature, the concept of cultural distance has provided a useful theoretical framework for understanding cross-cultural differences in tourist-host relations (e.g., Moufakkir, 2011) and tourist-service employee encounters (e.g., Moufakkir and Reisinger, 2016). However, its application to research on travel related dining behavior was scarce. In the tourism context, cultural distance refers to the

extent to which the tourists' home culture is similar to, or different from, the culture of the destination visited (Ng et al., 2007).

### 2.2. Local food with gastronomic identity

Tourists are often motivated by a desire to experience the "real" life of the local people. Trying local food can be a channel to fulfill the quest for an authentic experience that manifests the destination culture. Indigenous foods with cultural sophistication could actualize tourists' desire for novel and memorable dining and cultural experiences (Chang et al., 2011). For many tourists, whether the food constitutes for their primary travel motivation or not, a culinary feast that showcases the local cuisine is a plus of their itinerary. Such activity takes on the character of a ritualistic quest to fully experience a food in its original cultural context (Long, 2006). For example, Sims (2009) found that over 60% of the tourists in his study had deliberately chosen to consume foods or drinks that they considered "local". With such recognition, food as a central experience during the holiday has become recurring argument in academic debates recently (Therkelsen, 2015).

Nevertheless, the concept of local food was ambiguous (Mynttinen et al., 2015), and tourists, food producers, restaurateurs, and researchers often adopted different terms and definitions in accordance with their own interests and purposes (Montanari and Staniscia, 2009; Sims, 2009). For example, Chang et al. (2011) referred to food with gastronomic identity as the one that could represent a destination's character. Montanari and Staniscia (2009) defined local food as that represented a model of production and consumption with a strong link to the region in which the food was produced. In Omar et al. (2015)'s opinion, heritage food should be typical of local culinary and embedded in the cultural values that represented the community lifestyle. According to Mykletun and Gyimóthy (2010), traditional dishes should be anchored in local heritage, produced by traditional technologies and handicraft, imply high quality standard, be linked to certain places, and perceived as genuine for the places. Another concept that has similar connotation is national cuisine, if the locality under discussion is of a nation. For a type of food to become national cuisine, it should be an organic part of the national culture, and have a noticeable connection with the national identity, and be able to play a role in the image of the country (Riley, 2000). Despite the divergence in the definitions and terms discussed above, a common thread is the linkage between the food and a locality (and its culture) for the food to assume an identity of either local, regional, or national representation. As proposed by Sims (2009), the concept of local food connotes heritage. Tourists value local food because it is regarded to be a traditional product with a long history and inheritance at a location.

Currently, limited study has explored how local food came to assume the gastronomic identity of a destination. A seminal study by Mykletun and Gyimóthy (2010) explored the success factors that made the Norwegian culinary heritage food sheep's-head meal a remarkable tourism product. However, the study addressed the issue mainly from the perspective of entrepreneurship and business operators. Gordin and Trabskaya (2013) investigated the basis for creating a regional gastronomic brand, again from an industry experts' perspective. From a consumer perspective, Bekier-Jaworska and Bochenek (2014) identified regional dishes that could be described as brand dishes and as tourist attractions in Roztocze. Omar et al. (2015) disclosed three categorical factors influencing tourists' consumption attitude towards Malaysian heritage food, which included psychological and physiological factors as well as availability of food in the destination. Tourists tended to associate local food with particular specialty food (Sims, 2009). However, to date, it is unclear how tourists choose and consume

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