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Comparing the Meanings of Food in Different Chinese Societies: The Cases of Taiwan and Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Existing literature sheds little light on how Chinese consumers in any two societies perceive and consume food. In this study, the food perceptions of Taiwanese and Malaysian Chinese consumers are compared using a projective technique. Using images collected by respondents, both conscious and tacit interpretations of food were obtained. Findings reveal that Taiwanese and Malaysian Chinese share similar, but not identical, food perceptions. In this study, food is interpreted from a triadic framework: utilitarian (health, sustenance); hedonic (freedom, happiness, excitement, enjoyment, knowledge acquisition, love); and symbolic (sharing, warm relationships with others). Based on the emerged findings, the theoretical contributions of the study are highlighted, a number of managerial implications are proposed, and future research opportunities are recommended.

Keywords: Chinese, Cross-Cultural Study, Food Perception, Malaysia, Taiwan, ZMET

INTRODUCTION

Existing food studies have mainly focused on food choice motives (Prescott, Young, O'Neill, Yau, & Stevens, 2002; Sun, 2008) and perception of a specific food industry (Park, 2004; Ryu, Han, & Jang, 2010) or product (Barrena & Sánchez, 2013; Chen, 2008). Luomala (2007) and Brown, Edwards, and Hartwell (2010) have investigated the meanings of food, but their interpretations are based on a Western context, hence the Asian perspective remains uncharted. Adding to this dearth of understanding of Asians and their constructions of the meanings of food is how food practices in societies that have similar cultural backgrounds differ. For example, while Prescott et al. (2002) assert that Taiwanese and Malaysian Chinese share similar food choice motives (i.e., health, natural content, weight control, and convenience) because of their similar cultural origin, Chang et al. (2010) reveal that Chinese tourists from different regions (i.e., mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) have distinct levels of acceptance of local cuisine when travelling in Western destinations. In short, our knowledge of how food differs for individuals within the same culture remains limited, even when studies in other disciplines have delineated differences between them that point to significant implications (Fam & Waller, 2003; Tse, Belk, & Zhou, 1989). Furthermore, these similarities and differences of food perceptions are likely to evolve over time and generations (Wu & Tan, 2001) and are mediated by social class, social process, intercultural contacts, and local adaptation. The present study therefore extends prior research by comparing how Malaysian Chinese and Taiwanese consumers perceive food and eating by using an in-depth qualitative approach, with an aim to search for an answer regarding to what extent Chinese food values are shared by these two Chinese societies after years of acculturation.

This study aims to compare the similarities and contrast the differences between the Chinese in Malaysia and Taiwan in terms of the meanings of food and eating. Taiwanese Chinese and Malaysian Chinese share a common ethnic origin—the southeast coast of mainland China (Ma, 2003). Subsequently, they partake in a similar culinary style that reflects the food practices in Fujian and Guangzhou (Tan, 2011), and they share comparable food choice motives (Prescott et al., 2002). By comparing the food perception of Taiwanese and Malaysian Chinese, this study contributes to the literature in two main ways. First, it identifies salient similarities and disparities between Chinese in Taiwan and Malaysia, thereby providing both scholars and practitioners with an insight into how different Chinese societies perceive food and eating. It is important that scholars and practitioners do not adopt the common assumption that sees Chinese, Asians, or other cultural groups as a homogenous set of consumers because this could deliver misconceptions for the food industry. Second, by highlighting the differences between the two Chinese cultural groups, this study extends academic understanding of consumer concerns, which are associated with cultural beliefs, worldviews, social values, identities, food and restaurant choice motives, and food and eating attitudes from a cross-cultural single ethnic context, as opposed to the more common cross-cultural Asian-Western perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In view of the limited research on food meanings, the following review is based on a wide range of food literature, including food choice studies and food perception research on a specific food industry and product, with an aim to elicit the piecemeal knowledge that informs the meanings of food. Summarising the existing literature, the meanings and values of food can be discussed from a triadic framework: utilitarian (Anderson, 2005; Park, 2004), hedonic (Kwun, Hwang, & Kim, 2012; Rozin, 1999), and symbolic (Brown et al., 2010; Niva, 2008). The multiple layers of

meanings and interpretations of food are further moderated by the consumer's cultural background and personal experience (Costell, Tárrega, & Bayarri, 2010).

A Utilitarian Perspective – The Functional Benefits of Food

Utilitarian consumption refers to consumer behaviour or consumption that is functional, rational, and goal-oriented (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994; Park, 2004). The utilitarian function of food refers to human physiological needs for sustenance and nutrition (Lupton, 1994). Anderson (2005) suggests that at least five dimensions can describe the utilitarian functions of food: these include sustenance, temperature regulation, health, sleep and arousal, and sex. Food can satisfy hunger, maintain our physical wellbeing, provide stimulation, and act as an aphrodisiac. The utilitarian emphasis of food is evident in Chinese culture, which stresses the importance of longevity and health (Wu & Tan, 2001). The increasing number of studies on functional and organic food in Taiwan (Chen, 2008; Tung, Shih, Wei, & Chen, 2012) and Malaysia (Ahmad & Juhdi, 2010; Quah & Tan, 2009) endorse the utilitarian interpretation of food for Chinese consumers. Chinese believe that food can be classified following the *yin-yang* (literally, cold and hot) principle (Wu & Tan, 2001), so the regulation of diet according to *yin-yang* can prevent illness. Chinese also believe “you are what you eat” (Rozin, 1996, p. 19). For instance, eating a tiger’s penis improves men’s sexual ability and eating pork brains is good for mind development. These examples clearly illustrate the importance of health in Chinese culture. Nevertheless, the meanings underlying health for Chinese consumers have attracted minimal discussion.

A Hedonic Perspective – The Pleasure of Eating

Hedonic consumption refers to the sensorial, imaginative, and affective aspects of a consumption experience (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Hedonism is a subjective value that stems from the

quest for pleasure and sensation (Ryu et al., 2010), so the act of trying new food is one example of sensation-seeking (Zuckerman, 1994). The values of hedonic consumption include fun, enjoyment, freedom, excitement, and new knowledge acquisition (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; Babin et al., 1994; Jin, Sternquist, & Koh, 2003). Prior research has provided empirical evidence of the pleasure dimension of food (Barrena & Sánchez, 2013; Kwun et al., 2012; Rozin, 1999; Ryu et al., 2010; Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, & Lai, 2014). Novel food is commonly found to be associated with emotional stimulations such as happiness, enjoyment, excitement, and knowledge enhancement (Barrena & Sánchez, 2013; Yang et al., 2014; Yang & Khoo-Lattimore, 2015). The value of knowledge enhancement, whether it should be discussed from a hedonic or utilitarian perspective, is debatable. Some studies on consumer behaviour consider knowledge acquisition as a utilitarian value (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001; Yang & Khoo-Lattimore, 2015) while others categorise it as hedonic (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; Babin et al., 1994; Guido, 2006). The present study subscribes to the latter opinion, which regards the acquisition of knowledge or learning through eating, shopping, and other consumption activities as a leisure pursuit initiated by experiential motives (e.g., excitement, curiosity, pleasure) rather than functional purposes (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; Babin et al., 1994). Many Chinese communities in Asia are still greatly influenced by Confucian values. One of the tenets of Confucianism is its emphasis on self-cultivation through education and lifelong learning (Kennedy, 2002; Leung, 2001; Ryan & Louie, 2007). Despite this understanding, limited food literature has addressed the learning aspect in Chinese food practice.

A Symbolic Perspective – Eating and Socialising

The symbolic meaning of food refers to how consumers use food to convey social messages. This includes the representation of interpersonal relationships as well as self-identity (Charters, 2011).

Studies prior to Charters (2011) have highlighted the socialising function of food and eating. In particular, food is seen as a vehicle for socialising, sharing, and bonding with friends and family (Brown et al., 2010; Niva, 2008; Rozin, 1999). Eating and drinking on social occasions are often used to negotiate and foster social ties, draw group boundaries, and reinforce a sense of belonging (Barrena & Sánchez, 2013; Charters, 2011; Neely, Walton, & Stephens, 2014). Lupton (1994) has suggested that people do not remember food or a mealtime by itself, but “the social relationships around which the food was consumed” (p. 678). The symbolic meaning of food as a social vehicle might shed light on the marketing of exotic/authentic/ethnic cuisine and novel food products in a new market. This is particularly instrumental in a collectivist society such as Taiwan, where a busy and bustling eating ambiance referred to as “*renao*” by the Chinese, symbolises a positive consumption experience and togetherness (Warden & Chen, 2009). The emphasis on togetherness and group harmony is indeed an important feature in Chinese culture (Chang et al., 2010; Hoare, Butcher, & O’Brien, 2011).

Influence of Social and Cultural Background on Food Perception

Culture determines how and what we eat (Atkins & Bowler, 2001), and influences the way we construct and interpret the meanings of food (Bryant, DeWalt, Courtney, & Schwartz, 2003). What is considered as food, or otherwise, differs across societies and religions. Even within Asia, for example, the consumption of dog meat in Vietnam (Hodal, 2013) is not readily accepted by other Asians. In view of the influence of culture on food practices, a number of food studies have conducted cross-cultural comparisons. For instance, Prescott (1998) compared the taste preference of Japanese with Australians; Luomala, Sirieix, and Tahir (2009) compared the emotional eating patterns of Finnish, French, and Pakistanis. These studies compared food practices on distinct cultural platforms such as Western versus Asian cultures or individualistic

versus collectivistic societies, neglecting the social complexities within the same cultural group. In response to the scant understanding of the dynamic food practices across subcultural groups, this study examines the food perception of Taiwanese and Malaysian Chinese.

Taiwanese and Malaysian Chinese were migrated from South China (Ma, 2003). So it is not surprising that scholars writing about the movement of Chinese migrants assume homogeneity among the diverse Chinese populations, or over-stress discontinuity of culture from their homeland (Tan, 2011). However, Malaysian Chinese are different from Chinese migrants from elsewhere. For example, Malaysian Chinese live in a multicultural environment where Chinese have been a discriminated ethnic minority group (The Economist, 2013). Against this social context, Malaysian Chinese who are concerned about retaining their Chinese identity express this through Chinese food and food habits (Tan, 2011), which are shared and which bind people together in a single community (Nabhan, 2013). In contrast, the majority of the Taiwanese population are of Chinese descent (Yu & Kwan, 2008). Given the sovereignty conflicts between Taiwan and China, the growing tendency of “Taiwanisation” has diluted the Chinese identity. In this regard, the need to uphold a Chinese identity through Chinese food in Taiwan may not be as relevant as in Malaysia.

Based on the above review, several points are salient. First, the multifaceted nature of food has led to diverse interpretations of the meanings of food, but the majority of these interpretations are based on a Western perspective of food. The meanings of food in Western countries might not apply directly to Malaysian Chinese and Taiwanese consumers due to cultural differences. Second, the existing food studies mainly focused on food choice motives or on a specific food industry or product. There is a dearth of literature on the fundamental

meanings of food. Third, cross-cultural food studies often contrast research dimensions based on distinct cultural platforms, typically between Western and Asian cultures or between individualistic and collectivistic societies (Luomala et al., 2009; Prescott, 1998). This study compares Chinese in Malaysia and Taiwan, whose predecessors came from a similar Chinese origin, but the two subcultural groups have gone through different social processes. Finally, a majority of food research favours a quantitative approach (Park, 2004; Prescott, 1998; Prescott et al., 2002; Ryu et al., 2010), which has limited the investigation of latent food perception. In contrast, qualitative research that allows for in-depth understanding of consumer perceptions, which include both conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings in their own voices, is likely to provide new insights for food research concerning meanings and perceptions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Technique

Seeking to explore the meanings of food for Taiwanese and Malaysian Chinese, this research is conducted from a critical realist paradigm. In order to grasp the consumers' thoughts and feelings, Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) was employed. ZMET, a psychoanalytical tool that elicits meanings from respondents' self-prepared images, has been tested in both academic (Christensen & Olson, 2002; Khoo-Lattimore, Thyne, & Robertson, 2009; Ling, Yang, Liu, & Tsai, 2009; Satterfield, Kang, Baer, & Ladjahasan, 2008; Warden & Chen, 2009; Yang et al., 2014; Yang & Khoo-Lattimore, 2015) and industry research (Eakin, 2002). Although Sugai (2005) has proven ZMET to be an effective method for cross-cultural studies, its application to food research is rather limited (e.g., Satterfield et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2014; Yang & Khoo-Lattimore, 2015). ZMET is built on the underlying assumptions that most human communication is non-verbal (Weiser, 1988); people think by images instead of words (Zaltman, 1997); and

these images are the metaphors of thoughts (Danesi, 1990; Humphrey, 1999; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). Therefore, the main feature of ZMET is that it allows respondents to express their thoughts freely, by means of images they have collected beforehand. If administered appropriately, ZMET is able to elicit tacit meanings and values attached to the product feature; in this case, the food they eat. In brief, the procedure of ZMET can be broadly divided into three stages: photo collection, in-depth interview, and analysis.

Respondent Recruitment

The respondents were recruited using a combination of purposive sampling approaches, which includes criterion, convenience, and snowball sampling techniques. In total, 24 respondents, 12 from each country, were invited to participate in this research. The number of respondents was referred to the extant ZMET research that generally includes eight to sixteen respondents (Christensen & Olson, 2002; Ling et al., 2009; Warden & Chen, 2009; Yang et al., 2014; Yang & Khoo-Lattimore, 2015). The respondents were recruited based on three criteria: (1) they must have been born in their own country of residence (Malaysia or Taiwan); (2) they must have grown up, and currently reside, in the country they were born in (Malaysia or Taiwan) and; (3) they must be ethnically Chinese.

Data Collection

Each of the 24 respondents was requested to collect six to eight images that were related to their thoughts and feelings on food. In total, 168 images, both real life photographs and secondary images, were collected. These images serve as the metaphors for the meanings of food. For instance, respondent MCR4 (refer to Table 1) used an image of a hotel to express her feelings on food. She compared the feeling of trying novel food to her experience of uncertainty when

checking into a hotel. The images collected by each respondent were distinctive, which led to no conclusion as to what kind of metaphor was more preferred by one or another group of respondents. However, it is observed that a number of images that had religious connotations (e.g., temple and Buddha) were used by Taiwanese respondents when reflecting on their perceptions of food and eating, while none of the Malaysian Chinese respondents used them. This echoes a past finding (David, McLellan, Ngeow, Li, & Yee, 2010), which suggests a relatively weak influence of religion on the food practice of Malaysian Chinese as compared to other ethnic groups in Malaysia. The underlying reason for this phenomenon merits further empirical investigation.

A 90-minute in-depth ZMET interview was conducted with each respondent based on the images collected. The nine-step ZMET interview protocol as laid out by Zaltman (Zaltman, 1997; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995) and past studies that have adopted ZMET (Christensen & Olson, 2002; Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2009) was adopted. All interviews started with the first storytelling step, where the respondents were invited to tell the stories of the collected images and, more importantly, why these images were chosen. In all nine steps, the laddering technique was employed to probe from explicit constructs to implicit values as well as the causal relationships among the constructs (Ling et al., 2009; Zaltman, 1997).

Data Analysis

The transcribed data was coded and analysed according to the guideline of constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To ensure consistency, the data was analysed by the interviewer. The analysis was checked by the other two authors and was cross-checked with the mental maps created by the respondents. At the open coding stage, the interview transcripts were

read line-by-line and coded with *in-vivo codes*, in which the coding is based on the respondents' own words. The emerged codes were combed through to identify the dominant and recurrent concepts at the selective coding stage. The selected codes were developed into constructs. The codes developed at the initial stage were then synthesised and categorised under the emerged constructs. The constructs and the connections among the constructs were recorded in a consensus map. The initial map of Malaysian Chinese consisted of 59 constructs and 206 connections, whereas the Taiwanese consensus map covered 60 constructs and 227 linkages. Zaltman (1997) has advised ZMET researchers to consider only the constructs mentioned by at least half of the respondents and connections that have been agreed to by one third of them in the final map, so a 50% consensus level ($n=6$) was applied as the cut-off value for both constructs and connections. The high cut-off level has resulted in a concise map that contrasts the similarities and differences between the two consumer groups.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The Respondents

There were seven females and five males in the Malaysian Chinese group, and nine females and three males in the Taiwanese group. This means that out of the 24 respondents, 16 were females. We did not deliberately attempt to acquire a gender balance in our sample because the focus of this study was to identify the meanings and perceptions of food rather than how these meanings varied as a function of gender. As a result, there were more female respondents in both groups. The mean age for both groups was around 27 (26.6 for the Malaysian group and 27.3 for the Taiwanese group). Although we did not recruit the respondents based on the age criterion, the people who volunteered to participate in this research project were of a younger age group. In terms of occupation, our respondents came from a wide range of professions, ranging from

undergraduate and postgraduate students to an engineer, a photographer, teacher, chef, travel operator, designer, auditor, accountant, sales executive, and university lecturer. The profiles of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

“Insert Table 1 Here”

The Consensus Map of Food Perception

Figure 1 illustrates the consensus map that contrasts food perceptions of Malaysian Chinese respondents (MCRs) and Taiwanese respondents (TRs). In order to provide a better reflection of the literature, two utilitarian constructs (sustenance, health) are printed in boxes with diagonal lines while eight hedonic constructs (novel food, excitement, happiness, enjoyment, knowledge acquisition, comfort food, love, freedom) are enclosed in dotted boxes. The symbolic constructs (sharing, warm relationship with others) are presented in clear boxes. Square boxes indicate the explicit perceptions voluntarily mentioned by respondents, whereas constructs in round boxes are the implicit thoughts elicited during the ZMET interview. A diamond box at the right side of the map represents the moderator of a relationship. The size of the boxes indicates the level of consensus: a bigger box indicates a higher level of consensus. The causal relationship between two constructs is depicted by the arrows: solid arrows for MCRs and broken arrows for TRs. Similarly, the level of consensus of a relationship is represented by the weight of the arrows: the bolder the arrow, the higher the consensus level.

“Insert Figure 1 Here”

As shown in Figure 1, four themes (*novel food, health, sharing, and enjoyment*) were shared by both groups of respondents while *comfort food* was only relevant to MCRs. The themes were derived from explicit constructs (square boxes in Figure 1) with *sustenance* as the only exception. Considering that the concepts underlying *sustenance* were closely related to *enjoyment*, the latter was developed into a theme because it was shared by both TRs and MCRs. Thus, *enjoyment* would be more instrumental in organising relevant concepts revolving around the theme.

The resultant comparison map shows that both groups of Chinese consumers are not totally identical. Thus, it would be inappropriate to perceive them as a homogenous group of consumers. Although they shared common interpretations on some aspects of food perception, variation does exist. For instance, the Taiwanese group appears to have a stronger emphasis on the social function of food. As illustrated in Figure 1, TRs associated sharing with happiness and knowledge acquisition, which was achieved through conversations during mealtimes. These two connections were not salient in MCRs. Likewise, TRs demonstrated a higher agreement in the connection between sharing and social bonding. Hence, the findings suggest that Taiwanese food perception is more people-oriented. Contrastingly, the Malaysian group seems to have a higher emphasis on personal experience and cultural identity. MCRs agreed with TRs that food was a means of enjoyment, but with the condition that the available time to eat would determine whether food was an enjoyment or merely sustenance. MCRs are enthusiastic in seeking out unfamiliar/novel food and engaging in authentic dining experiences. The feeling of excitement emerging from trying new food was greatly emphasised by MCRs, who also achieved happiness through this process. Simultaneously, they sought the familiarity and comfort of home cooking and traditional cuisine, which reminded them of their self and cultural identities. The theme of

comfort food and its underlying value, love, were found to be significant only in MCRs. A detailed discussion of the findings is presented as follows.

Novel Food

MCRs and TRs tended to have positive perceptions towards novel food. Findings revealed that for both groups, trying novel food was associated with two hedonic values: knowledge acquisition and excitement. The findings are consistent with existing literature on the pleasure dimension of food (Kwun et al., 2012; Rozin, 1999) and hedonic consumption (Jin et al., 2003; Zuckerman, 1994). However, the relationship between trying new food and excitement was highly stressed by MCRs, with a consensus level of 91.67% ($nM=11$), while two thirds of TRs ($nT=8$) agreed on this linkage. Using the image of horse riding, TR9 commented, “Before I rode this horse, I was looking forward to it. It was only when I rode it that I knew it was so exciting. Just like when you try new food, it is very exciting. You do not know what kind of taste you are going to eat.” With regard to knowledge enhancement, MCR1 mentioned, “Trying new food gives me an opportunity to be familiar with delicacies from other culture. . . . It will contribute to my life experience. It is knowledge.”

The food neophilia tendency of Malaysian Chinese can be attributed to their multicultural background, since Malaysian food is diverse. Taiwanese food has also been influenced by various cultures, which include Japan, Fujian, and the island itself (Wu & Tan, 2001). TRs reported how the diversified food practices in Taiwan have influenced their food acceptance level: “Taiwanese food is considered diverse as it was colonised and it is an island. It receives a huge influence from China and Japan. We have more variety to choose from. So we have a higher level of acceptance.” (TR8)

Health

Both MCRs and TRs were highly concerned with the utilitarian function of food, which is health. One Taiwanese respondent used a photo of a temple to depict the idea of “eating is a belief”. The owner of this photo, TR3 believed that a healthy diet led to a healthy body. The findings provide support to existing literature that for the Chinese, food is medicine and is a preventive measure against illness (Wu & Tan, 2001; Yang et al., 2014).

For both MCRs and TRs, being healthy was associated with the hedonic value of freedom. Respondents were concerned about the consequences of being unhealthy because it might jeopardise their freedom in both food choice and mobility: “The first thought that came into my mind about being unhealthy is lying in the hospital . . . I will be constrained like a bird in the cage. It means that one does not have the freedom to do things that one wants to do” (MCR8); “You are restricted. You do not have the freedom do other things. That is the consequence of being unhealthy” (TR3). There are subtle differences found between the two groups within the theme of health. It appears that MCRs placed a slightly stronger emphasis on health ($nM=11$; $nT=9$) and on the relationship between health and freedom ($nM=8$; $nT=6$).

Sharing

Both groups of respondents ($nM=9$; $nT=11$) perceived sharing as one of the most important dimensions of food. For MCRs and TRs, food and eating were closely related to people, be it friends, family members, or colleagues. The underlying meaning of dining with friends and family or including food in a conversation was to foster warm relationships with others. MCR6 stated, “It makes me feel glad that I have these friends in my life to do this (eating and sharing) together. It makes me feel that living in this world is worthy.” MCRs generally agreed that food

was merely for sustenance when they ate alone, but with the presence of others, the meanings of food changed, as did the taste. They confessed that food tasted nicer when eating with others as the focus was on people, not the food itself. Past studies have manifested the symbolic function of food as a social marker that provides a sense of social belonging (Barrena & Sánchez, 2013; Neely et al., 2014; Rozin, 1999). However, these studies were not conducted in the Asian context. This study has extended their work to Asian consumers of Chinese descent from a collectivist culture.

There are two main differences between the two groups within this theme. For TRs, sharing is a means of acquiring new knowledge: “It (food) can be a conversation topic. When we are chatting, I can gain things that I do not know from you and vice versa” (TR8). For MCRs, the linkage between sharing and knowledge was not recorded in the consensus map. This distinction can be attributed to the different developmental stages of the knowledge economy of the two societies. Taiwan was ranked 13th in the world Knowledge Economy Index (KEI) while Malaysia was far behind, at 48th (The World Bank, 2012). Second, a relationship was found between sharing and happiness for TRs but not for MCRs. The existing literature on *renao* (Ackerman & Walker, 2009; Warden & Chen, 2009) has provided some implications of the value of sharing and the presence of people for Taiwanese consumers. *Renao* refers to an exciting, bustling, and crowded environment (e.g., night market). Food and eating always relate to *renao* in Taiwanese culture because it signals a good consumption experience and collectivism, while in the eyes of the West, it can be related to a chaotic and negative experience (Warden & Chen, 2009). Nevertheless, the underlying reason for this discrepancy, especially the reason for why sharing did not lead to happiness for Malaysian Chinese, was unidentified and therefore, warrants further investigation.

Enjoyment

Both MCRs and TRs agreed on the hedonic and pleasure dimensions of food. The respondents generally perceived food as an enjoyment that eventually led to happiness. Respondents from Malaysia commented, “It (food) cheers you up. It makes you feel happy” (MCR4). Similarly, respondents from Taiwan lent support to this idea: “When I eat something delicious, I feel very happy. . . . The feeling is like a dark room become bright. Just like a lamp has been switched on” (TR9). The findings resonate with existing literature that supported the pleasure dimension of food (Barrena & Sánchez, 2013; Kwun et al., 2012; Rozin, 1999; Ryu et al., 2010).

There was a slight distinction in the interpretation of enjoyment for both groups of respondents. Similar to TRs, MCRs highlighted the importance of enjoyment where food was concerned. Nevertheless, MCRs opined that the enjoyment of food was determined by the time factor, as MCR3 stated, “If I am eating in a rush, no matter how beautiful is the environment, how delicious is the food, it becomes merely sustenance. Just like animal gorg[ing] on food when hungry.” In other words, enjoyment and sustenance are the two sides of one coin, moderated by the amount of time that one has for a meal. Perhaps the predominant lifestyle in both societies could provide some indications of how food is consumed, whether it is taken for sustenance or it is taken for enjoyment. Recently, the Taiwanese government has been introducing the lifestyle of health and sustainability (LOHAS), of which the slow food movement is one of the highlights (Gregory, McTyre, & Dipietro, 2006; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Taiwan, 2012). Contrastingly, the LOHAS lifestyle is not widely promoted in Malaysia, though the trend is observed to be rising gradually.

Comfort Food

The major difference between MCRs and TRs lies in the perception of *comfort food*. Comfort food such as home cooking and traditional food were perceived as an important dimension of food and eating for MCRs, and love was revealed as the underlying hedonic value: “My mom uses her heart to prepare food. . . . No matter how delicious it (eating out) is, it does not have the love inside” (MCR7); “Mom cooks with love, wholeheartedly. You know there is love inside, you can feel the food” (MCR10). Based on the findings, the feeling of love distinguishes comfort food (mostly referred to as home cooking) from other types of food or eating experiences, and particularly so from commercialised dining experiences. Although there is a growing number of Malaysians eating out due to the increasingly hectic modern working lifestyle, home-cooked dinners are still an important part of Malaysian culture (Poulain, 2014). They believe in the importance of family ties and perceive home cooking and eating together as a means to foster family relationships. Some of the respondents also acknowledged that food outlets which offered traditional cuisine or ambience would remind them of the taste of home cooking and their cultural identity. Contrastingly, only two TRs brought up this topic of which the underlying reason was unclear. The lesser significance given to home cooking by TRs can be attributed to the convenience-oriented lifestyle and eating out culture whereby 70% of Taiwanese eat out at least three days a week (Euromonitor International, 2013).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study was to compare the meanings of food between Taiwanese and Malaysian Chinese. The results reveal that Chinese from Taiwan and Malaysia share similar but not identical food perceptions. They have similar perceptions of the broad meanings of food, but also exhibit important differences regarding the interpretations of each theme and relationship. In

sum, the disparities found between Taiwanese and Malaysian Chinese suggest that even when the origin of both groups of Chinese migrants was the same region, years of acculturation, geographical isolation, and the local social context have significant impacts on the evolution of respective food practices. It would be inaccurate to assume that Chinese in general share homogenous perceptions of food. This insight contributes to cross-cultural food research from an Asian-Asian perspective, rather than an Asian-Western perspective.

There are three subtle yet important differences in the ways food and eating are perceived between Taiwanese and Malaysian Chinese. First, Taiwanese respondents tend to used metaphors with religious connotations to represent their thoughts and feelings for food, while this was not observed with Malaysian Chinese respondents. One of the possible explanations is the weak influence of religion on Malaysian Chinese food practices, as suggested by David et al. (2010), but whether there is other underlying reason warrants further investigation. Second, the Taiwanese group appears to assign more importance to the socialising meaning of food. This variation can be attributed to the different social contexts. As an ethnic minority with high economic strength, Chinese in Malaysia have been stereotyped as self-centred, apathetic, and highly competitive (*kiasu*) (Lee, 2007). This understanding could perhaps explain why Malaysian Chinese place less value than Taiwanese on the socialising meaning of food. Despite the subtle variation, the sharing of food or meals is still a valued concept within both Chinese societies. This finding not only reaffirms the symbolic meaning of food as a social marker and the theory of social belonging (Barrena & Sánchez, 2013; Neely et al., 2014; Niva, 2008), but also provides an additional insight into the sustainable notion of collectivism within food tourism studies. This evidence of preserving Chinese collectivist culture, commensality, and group harmony has been discussed in China (Chang et al., 2010; Hoare et al., 2011), but not in Chinese communities in

Southeast Asia until now. Third, Malaysian Chinese respondents displayed a stronger cultural identity in their food perceptions than their Taiwanese counterparts. This variation can also be explained by the minority status of Chinese in Malaysia. When at risk of being assimilated, Malaysian Chinese strive to preserve their cultural identity. Traditional Chinese cuisine thus provides an important identity marker for Malaysian Chinese to reaffirm and to remind them of their Chinese origin.

In terms of similarity, both groups of respondents are concerned about healthy food. The health emphasis is in accordance with Chinese traditions, which have been extensively recorded in existing literature (Prescott et al., 2002; Wu & Tan, 2001). Nevertheless, this study has advanced knowledge of the sociological meanings of food by revealing freedom as the tacit meaning of being healthy, at least where Chinese societies in Taiwan and Malaysia are concerned. Likewise, both groups of respondents expressed positive attitudes towards trying new food such as ethnic cuisine from other countries. This similarity can be explained by the diversified food practices in both countries: Malaysian food has been influenced by its multicultural background; Taiwanese food has received influences from Fujian and Japan. Barrena and Sánchez (2013) have suggested the association between novel food and emotional value. Advancing on their thesis, this study unveils knowledge acquisition as the tacit emotional benefits of novel food for both groups of respondents. Both groups of respondents perceived the trying of novel food and having novel dining experiences as educational opportunities that could enhance their “cultural capital” and enable them to discuss and evaluate other cuisines. Theoretically, this finding is the first to link the Confucian emphasis on learning (Kennedy, 2002; Leung, 2001; Ryan & Louie, 2007) to food tourism frameworks.

Based on the empirical findings, a number of suggestions are provided to benefit the marketers of restaurateurs in Taiwan and Malaysia. The findings show that both consumer groups hold positive attitudes towards trying new food and are excited by new dining spots, which imply an optimistic market for food exporters, restaurant operators, and food tourism planners from both countries. New food establishments could probably gain optimal popularity in their fledgling stages of setting up, if they manage to promote their novelty and create the excitement of the visit, especially for Malaysian Chinese consumers who value strongly the excitement of trying new food. However, operators should also be cautious and have initiatives in place for encouraging return visits. Featuring health in the marketing strategy is likely to attract Chinese consumers from both markets. Marketers can utilise the consumers' deep-seated needs for socialising and fostering relationships over mealtimes, by designing ambience and dining experiences that promote group dining and sharing. This can be achieved by using movable tables and chairs that can be easily arranged according to the group size, and providing set menus or discounts for groups to attract social diners. These strategies will be especially fruitful for operators targeting Taiwanese consumers who place great emphasis on the socialising function of food and eating. Another strategy to be considered is to promote a particular restaurant via group buying sites (e.g., Groupon), which would at the same time fulfil the social role of eating as well as the pleasure or fun dimension of food. Similarly, food marketers in both societies are encouraged to promote the fun element of the cuisine. Telling the story behind a cuisine, such as where ingredients come from, what they are made of, and the Chinese legends associated with it, can be one of the strategies, as both groups of consumers perceive food as a means of enjoyment and knowledge enhancement. As for the Malaysian Chinese market, traditional cuisine with home-cooked tastes and nostalgic decorations which remind them of their cultural identity are likely to attract consumers. Likewise, restaurateurs targeting Malaysian Chinese customers

should consider incorporating some aspects from the slow-food concept in their menus and dining settings to encourage quality dining experiences. This is because the span of a mealtime plays a crucial role in deciding the meaning of food. Given the qualitative nature of this study, the findings are not intended to be generalised. However, this is not to say that the results do not contribute insights to marketers in understanding their consumers from a more reflective perspective. For example, while the specific distinctions between Malaysian and Taiwanese Chinese cultures might not be directly informative for operators in Europe or Africa, there is a lesson nonetheless. Disregard for subcultures within ethnic groups could result in businesses missing out on opportunities for a new market share and revenue generation. This study could provide a framework for food operators to begin exploring differences among subcultures in their own markets.

The limitation of this study lies in its focus on individual food perceptions rather than society, which neglected the macro-level of social interpretation (Anderson & Taylor, 2009). Given that this study does not focus on gender difference, the Taiwanese sample was dominated by females. Past studies have shown that women are more prone to sharing their experience compared to men (Petronio & Martin, 1986; Yu, 2014) and therefore, research of this nature tends to attract more women when gender screening is not applied. Future research could explore if gender difference exists in the meanings of food and eating. Future research might also consider replicating similar research on destinations whose targeted consumers share a similar cultural background. Some of the examples would be to compare the food and eating perceptions of consumers from Hong Kong and China, and those from Malaysia and Singapore. Research of this nature would contribute important insights to food marketers and food destination planners

because it addresses and examines the common assumption that regards Chinese, Asian, or other cultural groups as a homogenous set of consumers.

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TABLE**Table 1** Respondent Profiles

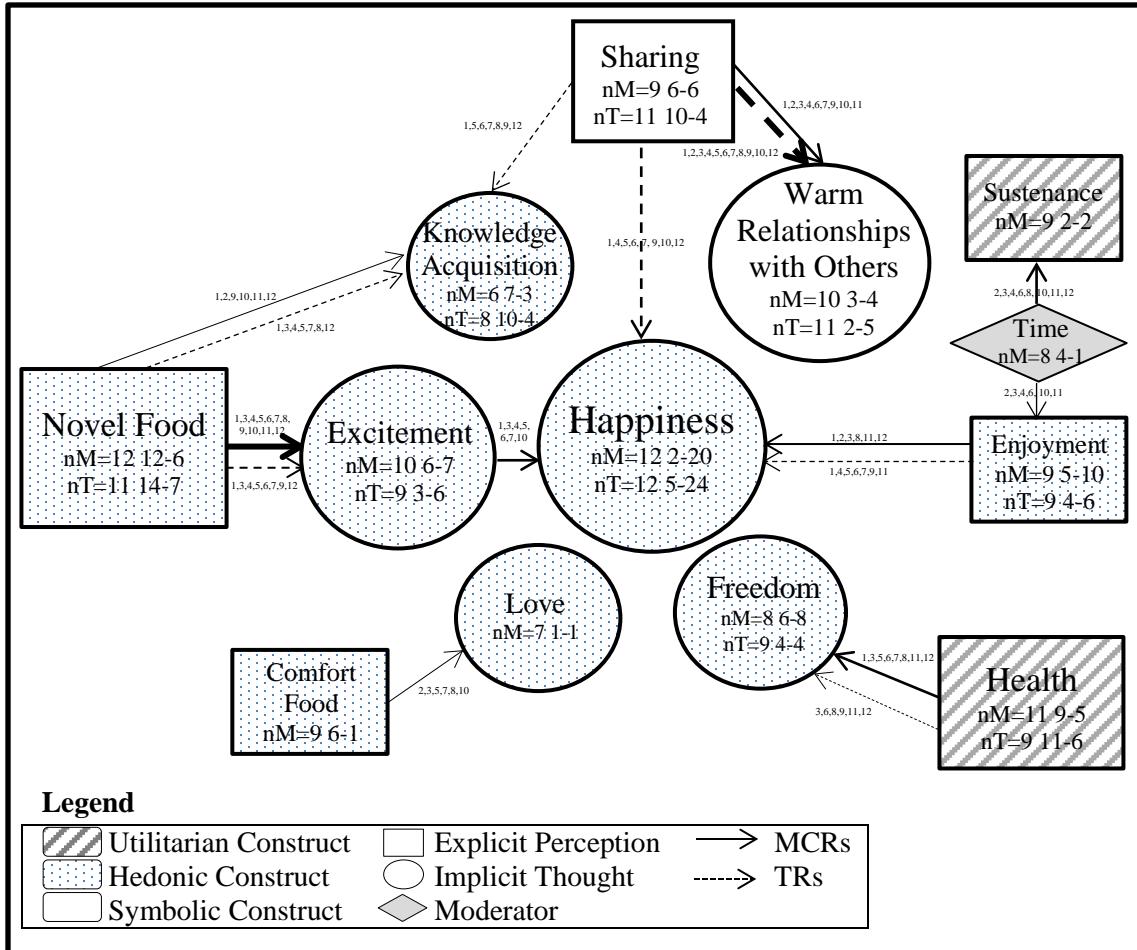
Respondent	Gender	Age	Profession
MCR1	Female	26	Postgraduate Student
MCR2	Male	34	Chef
MCR3	Male	28	Secretary
MCR4	Female	30	Investment Sales Manager
MCR5	Female	25	Food Production R&D Executive
MCR6	Female	22	Undergraduate Student
MCR7	Female	22	Undergraduate Student
MCR8	Male	25	Auditor
MCR9	Female	25	Accounting Executive
MCR10	Female	28	Event Planner
MCR11	Male	29	University Lecturer
MCR12	Male	33	Software Engineer
TR1	Female	30	Hotel Administrative Executive
TR2	Female	25	High School Teacher
TR3	Female	26	High School Teacher
TR4	Male	25	Postgraduate Student
TR5	Male	27	Wedding Photographer
TR6	Male	27	Tour Escort
TR7	Female	26	Hostel Warden
TR8	Female	26	Postgraduate Student

TR9	Female	25	Manufacturing Sales Executive
TR10	Female	28	Event Photographer
TR11	Female	28	Graphic Designer
TR12	Female	26	Special Education Teacher

Note: MCR refers to Malaysian Chinese respondents while TR denotes Taiwanese respondents.

FIGURE

Figure 1 Consensus Map of Food Perceptions



Note. In the construct box, nM (T) equals the number of Malaysian Chinese (Taiwanese) respondents who have agreed to a particular construct. The numbers on the arrow indicate the code of the respondent who has supported a particular relationship. The number at the left (right) of the hyphen indicates the frequency of this construct being an origination (destination) point in a connection with other constructs.