

Performing authenticity: independent Chinese travellers' tourism dining experiences in Europe

Abstract

Authenticity seeking in dining experiences has focused on “perceptions” rather than “doing” and “sense-making”. This study aims to understand how independent Chinese travellers perform authenticity through their dining experiences in Europe through the lens of performance theory. A mobile ethnography approach was applied by following 14 informants in 3 trips across Europe to gain an in-depth understanding of independent Chinese travellers' dining experiences. Three sets of field notes, 21 interview transcripts, drawings, reflexive diaries, social media posts, and blogs were collected. The findings suggest that independent Chinese travellers navigate between directed performance and improvised play in tourism dining. They seek the novelties and familiarities of food in the process of perceiving, understanding, appreciating and rejecting authenticity. This study extends our understanding of experienced authenticity through the lens of performance theory. Furthermore, the study provides detailed accounts of overlooked authenticity-seeking through tourism dining of the non-Western market segment.

Keywords:

performance theory, authenticity, tourism dining, independent Chinese travellers, mobile ethnography, food

1. Introduction

A growing number of tourists seek authenticity through tourism dining (Hjalager & Richards, 2002; Le et al., 2019; Quan & Wang, 2004); they value it as a crucial part in understanding local cultures during holidays (Falconer, 2013). Unlike other forms of travel activities, consumption and enjoyment of local cuisines as a source of embodied experience, meaning and pleasure (Hjalager & Richards, 2002) have become a way of experiencing other cultures and appreciating the socio-cultural characteristics of a destination (Long, 2004). Previous studies have reported an intricate relationship between food and tourism. For example, food can be one of the reasons for visiting a destination (Kivela & Crofts, 2006), an “attraction” in itself (Richards, 2003), to support consumer experience, whether symbolic or “attractionized” (Mak et al., 2013), or to create opportunities to enhance social relations, learning about other cultures and belonging (Hjalager & Wahlberg, 2014). Also, tourism dining experiences are subjective, depending on individual characteristics, including motivations, socio-demographics, travel characteristics and food-related personality traits (Mak et al., 2012).

As an essential part of the tourist experience, food plays a central role in the Chinese collective and individual identity (Veeck & Burns, 2005). Although Suntikul et al. (2019)’s study suggests that Chinese tourists consider consuming local food as an important way to acquire local culture, previous studies suggest Chinese consumers, especially group tourists, tend to have a strong attachment to traditional Chinese food when abroad (Chang et al., 2010; Li et al., 2011; Yen et al., 2018). Lin et al. (2020) found that both package and independent Chinese tourists only selectively tried the local cuisine when travelling in Spain, and had several coping strategies for unaccustomed dining. Although a strong attachment towards traditional Chinese food was reported in the literature, young Chinese consumers’ tastes are

changing, with global food brands gaining popularity in China, forming an integral part of their daily diet (Chang et al., 2010).

In recent years, the independent segment has been replacing the organised groups in the Chinese outbound market - one of the biggest outbound segments globally. Characteristics such as looking for authentic experiences, virtual socialisation, tech-savvy and “doing homework” for decision-making have been highlighted (Prayag et al., 2015; Xiang, 2013). With the diversification and growth of the independent Chinese outbound segment, the investigation of Chinese travellers’ tourism dining experiences will contribute to a clearer understanding of this consumer profile.

This study aims to address three research gaps. Firstly, most studies in tourism dining and authenticity are Western-centric (Le et al., 2019). Also, previous studies of Chinese tourists’ food consumption still focus on group tourists and overlook the increasing trend of independent Chinese travellers (Chang et al., 2010; Yen et al., 2018). Furthermore, seeking authenticity in dining experiences mostly focuses on “perceptions” rather than “doing” and “sense-making”. Therefore, the research question of this study is: *how do independent Chinese travellers perform authenticity through their dining experiences in Europe?*

The performance theory (Haldrup & Larsen, 2009) is consulted to investigate the embodied experiences of “doing” authenticity and provides insights on the complexity of the authenticity seeking, which is not only socially constructed but also improvised and practised. The contextual insights of independent Chinese travellers’ dining experiences will not only contribute to the shift from Eurocentrism to a new mobilities paradigm but also provide an insightful understanding of the independent Chinese travel segment. Following the literature review, details of mobile ethnography as the research method will be outlined. Findings are

provided regarding how independent Chinese travellers perform authenticity through tourism dining, followed by a synthesis and conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Perceptions of Authenticity in Tourism Dining

Since its introduction in tourism studies by MacCannell (1973), the notion of authenticity has gained diverse understanding and different connotations without a commonly agreed definition (Cohen, 2007; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Over the years, tourism academics have attempted to theorise the notion of authenticity through various perspectives (Belhassen et al., 2008; Le et al., 2019; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999). Wang (1999) proposes three approaches to understanding authenticity. Objective authenticity provides an absolute criterion of measuring authenticity, implying tourism objects as either authentic or inauthentic (MacLeod, 2006; Wang, 1999). Constructive, emergent authenticity denotes if something is authentic through the social construction of beliefs or perspectives (Wang, 1999), influenced by personal worldviews and external factors (MacLeod, 2006). Existential authenticity focuses on the final process of tourism activities, and does not attempt to determine if something is authentic or not (Shepherd, 2015). The objective and constructive authenticity adopt the object-centred approach (as the other, the toured), whereas the existential authenticity maintains the self-seeking approach (the self as the centre, the tourist) (Wang, 2007; Zhu, 2012).

From a postmodernist approach, Reisinger and Steiner (2006) emphasised the blurred boundary between real and unreal, reality and its representation, and the copy and the original through the deconstruction of authenticity and achieving a state of hyper-reality (Eco, 1986; Hughes, 1995), thus arguing to abandon the concept altogether as it was no longer an essential concern for a postmodern tourist. Although we acknowledge the understanding of

no genuine and objective reality through the lens of postmodernism, we do not abandon the concept of authenticity. Instead, we stand on a constructivist position with an understanding of authenticity depicted in cultural changes through a continuous process of (re)invention and (re)construction (Bruner, 1994). Authenticity, thus, results from the many personal and social influences (Mkono, 2012). In addition, Belhassen and Caton (2006, p. 855) argued that “as long as someone is aware of it, it should still be relevant to scholarship”.

In this study, we approach authenticity through the perspective of constructive authenticity. Empirical studies on tourists’ perception of authenticity are mainly explored through the constructivist approach by refusing a single, authoritative definition of authenticity (Cohen, 2007; Waite, 2000). Through a constructive approach, authenticity is “projected onto toured objects by visitors or tourism producers in terms of their imagery, expectations, preferences, beliefs, powers, etc.” (Wang, 1999, p. 352). This approach, therefore, destabilises the experts and authority’s criteria and judgement of authenticity; instead, suggests a process of negotiation and meaning-making that is socially co-constructed by different stakeholders in various contextual settings (Cohen, 1988; Hughes, 1995). Cohen (2007) emphasised that differing from existential authenticity focusing on the “self”, the constructive approach represents authenticity as subjective practices which tourists construct through the “objective” authenticity of a site or an object.

In relation to the research aim, we can understand independent Chinese travellers’ perceptions of authenticity as their subjective practices influenced by symbols and signs (Culler, 1981), determined by social and cultural discourse, WoM (word-of-mouth), media, and the need for social approval (Le et al., 2019). In this case, tourists set their own criteria and make their own judgement if the site, event or an object is authentic or not (Bruner, 1994; Xie et al., 2012). Judged by experts and professionals, informed by the objective authenticity lens, the site, event or an object can be “inauthentic”, but might be subjectively perceived as

authentic by tourists (Mkono, 2012), and over time, developed into the “emergent authenticity” (Cohen, 1988).

Since the nature of the tourist experience is multifaced and subjective (Nguyen, 2020), in this study, the complex and elusive concept of authenticity is understood from the perspective of the tourist. Given the various meanings such as original, genuine, real, or true to itself (Pratt, 2007), authenticity also conveys certain quality that is highly valued in the marketplace (Frazier et al., 2009), which has shifted goods, services and experiences away from being homogenised, mass-produced and commoditised (Le et al., 2019).

Local food plays a significant role for tourists to perceive authenticity. Through authentic ethnic food consumption, tourists can gain an authentic cultural experience different from home (Ebster & Guist, 2005; Okumus et al., 2007; Roseman, 2006; Sukalakamala & Boyce, 2007), not only through the unique ingredients and cooking methods but also through an engagement with locals and the contextual environments (Pratt, 2007). Sims (2009) suggests an authentic food experience should emphasise elements of tradition or naturalness, not simply because these foods are local, but because of the historical ties between traditional food production and that particular location. Wang and Mattila (2015)’s study found authenticity being studied in relation to other concepts and concluded that heritage, landscape and culture are relevant to how tourists understand authenticity in holiday food experiences.

Earlier studies on ethnic foods in restaurants have identified authenticity as a key factor in aspects of food, employee service, and dining environment (Jang et al., 2012; Liu & Jang, 2009a, 2009b; Sukalakamala & Boyce, 2007; Tsai & Lu, 2012). For instance, customers value food authenticity in Thai restaurants more (Tsai & Lu, 2012), whereas American customers’ perceptions of authenticity in these restaurants aim for new tastes and unfamiliar cuisines (Sukalakamala & Boyce, 2007). Studies found authenticity, together with food,

service and atmospherics as critical factors for customers' satisfaction and behavioural intentions in Chinese restaurants (Liu & Jang, 2009a) and Korean restaurants (Ha & Jang, 2010).

When applied to food and tourism dining, Morgan et al. (2008) understood authenticity as variety and quality attributes of local cuisines from a destination. Authenticity can also represent the unique traits of a nation's culture (Yeoman et al., 2007); therefore, ethnic restaurants are very popular to culture seekers. Factors affecting food authenticity include unfamiliar and locally sourced ingredients (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Sims, 2009; Yeoman et al., 2007), cooking processes (Zibart et al., 1995), and unfamiliar food names (Jang et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2017), which to some extent contribute to their positive experiences. Through a constructive perspective, Mkono (2012)'s study revealed tourists with fluid understandings of African culture, seek cultural representations in search of authenticity through tourism dining.

Although the notion of authenticity has been widely investigated in tourism, including various factors that affect perceived authenticity, such as cultural motivations (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010), attitudes (Zhou et al., 2013), and imagination (Bryce et al., 2017), limited studies regarding perceptions of authenticity in dining experiences can be found. Summarised in the recent systematic literature review article by Le et al. (2019), studies investigating authenticity in dining experiences have largely focused on culture, ethnic, and ethnic-themed restaurants. Le et al. (2019) argue that this overwhelming focus results in an assumption that authenticity in a dining experience can only be related to a cultural and ethnic context and overlooks the complexity and multi-dimensional approach to authenticity. By exploring the perception of authenticity through the process of sense-making and performing, this study goes beyond the ethnic-themed dining experience and engages in a complex understanding of authenticity through embodied experiences, intercultural negotiations, and perception

changes. We, therefore, consider “perception of authenticity” as a dynamic and fluid term that do not exist independently of the tourist’s mind, and which is constantly (re)constructed and influenced by situated encounters and an internal negotiating process.

2.2. Performance theory

Performance theory develops from Goffmanian theatrical performative metaphors (Goffman, 1959) to conceptualise the themed and staged nature of tourist place, as well as the scripted and embodied actions of tourist bodies (Larsen, 2005). Performance theory offers new insights within tourism dining, where consumption and production are hybrid, mutual processes occur simultaneously, and the distinction between consumer and producer becomes blurred (Bærenholdt et al., 2004; Ek et al., 2008).

Performance turn in tourism suggests moving away from the “tourist gaze”, which favours symbolic meaning, discourses and visual qualities in travel experiences towards new perspectives that incorporate multisensory experiences (Edensor, 2000; Haldrup & Larsen, 2009). Researchers suggest that tourists’ experience places in multisensory ways, including multiple bodily sensations such as touching, doing, smelling and hearing (Jensen et al., 2015). Performance turn, therefore, shifts the focus to doing (Franklin & Crang, 2001), where the embodied practices of tourists and their potentials of improvisation, as well as their entanglement with environmental affordances, are acknowledged as injecting liveliness and joy to tourist studies (Edensor, 2001).

There has been a gradual change from framing tourists’ performances as rituals, where tourists are viewed as fixed (Osborne, 2000) and passive with desires to “experience, perceive and receive but not do” (Crang, 1999, p. 238), to Adler (1989)’s “performed art” suggesting tourists as actors who re-produce their roles within the orchestrated tourism stage.

The crux of performance, according to Thrift (2008), relates to “restored behaviour”, since performances are the product of repeated rehearsals, imitation of other performances and adjustment to norms and expectations.

Discussion of performance in tourism is most certainly inclusive of staging and scripting provided by guidebooks, promotional brochures, and websites that shape place and destination myths (Larsen, 2006). However, this does not mean that performances are taught, pre-determined or predictable. Edensor (2001) suggested that performance in tourism should go beyond the context of how places are materially and symbolically staged to tourists, and engage in understanding how tourists inscribe places with their own stories while maintaining scripts. In tourism dining context, tourists are not only choreographed by guides and visible signs, but also by concealed dining etiquettes, cultural codes and norms. Therefore, tourist experiences are considered as a complex system of social and cultural relationships performed by a variety of actors’ identities through gendered, aged, sexed, and racialised bodies (Edensor, 2001). Central to the work of Goffman is self-presentation or creating impressions in the presence of others, that includes the effort and strategies employed to manage and create impressions regarding “the self”, and to experiment and construct one’s identity (Whitty, 2008). After all, dining in a restaurant is a public display of social class (Chang et al., 2010; Mak et al., 2012), where “cultural capital” allows understanding variations in tourist food consumption behaviour. Food has symbolic meanings and reflects consumers’ social identities (Chang et al., 2011; Mak et al., 2012).

As dining involves tourist embodied practices within choreographed tablescapes and servicescapes (Kim & Moon, 2009; Lucas, 2003), the concepts of “ritual” and “play” are crucial in creating a balance between “restoration” or structure and “difference” or agency; as a result, every performance is peculiar yet different (Schechner, 2012). In contrast to a scripted “ritual” performance, the “playful” performance demands fluidity and complexity

based on exploratory practices, detours and productivity, as much as choreographies and scripts do (Larsen, 2005). Although performance theory is yet to be applied in understanding tourism dining, the practice of “ritual” and “play” can be found in various studies. In Chang et al. (2010)’s research, they found that whilst following the ritualised and scripted Western etiquettes, Chinese package group tourists simultaneously introduced their cultural codes and norms by experimenting with Western tastes by adding soy sauce and eating Western food, such as spaghetti with chopsticks when travelling in Australia. In Osman et al. (2014)’s study, McDonald’s provided tourists with much needed Westernised comfort, familiarity (ritual) and a needed break from exotic food tourism (play) before going back to it. These studies demonstrate that performance in tourist dining is never dictated by choreography solely, but also by tourist embodied practices (Larsen, 2005), creating a continuous fluid cycle between ritual and play.

Another feature of performance theory that is often neglected in tourism is how embodied actors interact with space and objects (Edensor, 2006). Yet, Gibson’s (1977) notion of affordance enhances our understanding of how performances are enabled and disabled by specific objects and material environments. Tourism studies that have considered affordance mainly investigated how the physical attributes of space-enabled specific performances (Bærenholdt et al., 2004; Rantala, 2010). In most tourism studies, the notion of place has been conceptualised as a still, static and passive notion without much discussion of its connections with people who are enacting on it. The performance theory destabilises this conceptualisation of places, which matches well with the dynamic approach of understanding the authenticity sense-making. Furthermore, the concept of physical space within affordance has been advanced towards the social affordances of technology in backpacking (Germann Molz & Paris, 2015). Editing and distribution of images via social media on the so-called

“statusphere” (Paris, 2011) provided travellers with the opportunity to share travel experiences with distant families and friends.

This study uses performance as a theoretical lens to investigate Chinese tourists’ experience of authenticity through tourism dining. First, performance turn suggests the research in perception of authenticity is moving away from the representational and static understanding of authenticity and toward the non-representational “execution of authenticity”. The shift from the tourist gaze to ontologies of acting and doing and the emphasis of the multisensory and embodied experience of the performance theory will provide rich explanations of Chinese travellers’ negotiation process when perceiving authenticity. Second, the focus of material affordance in performance theory such as the food, servicescape of the restaurant and the destinations provide a stage for authenticity-seeking, whilst the social affordance provided by mobile technology offers real-time opportunities for tourists to authenticate their experiences through establishing and strengthening their “statusphere”.

Also, the theatre metaphors of the performance theory provide a framework to investigate the embodied experiences of “doing” authenticity in detail. Although tourists perform specific “culture codes” and “rituals” by following prescribed routes and scripts, the performance turn helps to discover creativity, detours and productive practices among tourists (Edensor, 2000). On one hand, tourists recreating and emphasising the destination image by following the travel guides, WoM recommendations and tourist information; on the other, they actively contribute new meanings and stories to the place from their own unique practices.

With performance theory as the theoretical framework, this study is set to explore the following issues. First, how the abstract, pre-trip destination image influences Chinese travellers’ authenticity-seeking through tourism dining. Second, what are the roles of e-WoM platforms and Chinese culture in the negotiation process of perceiving authenticity? Third,

how material affordances and technologies facilitate the perception of authenticity. And finally, how Chinese travellers validate authentic experiences through tourism dining in different stages of the trip.

3. Methodology

Mobile ethnography as a research strategy, including netnography and multi-sited ethnography (Blinded, 2019; Kozinets, 2019) was used to achieve a deep understanding of independent Chinese travellers' dining experiences in Europe. Using "follow the people" approach (Marcus, 1995), mobile ethnography allows the researcher to fully immerse with the mobile group (in this case, independent Chinese travellers) and gain a deep understanding of their experiences through data collection techniques such as participant observation, collecting artefacts, semi-structured and conversational interviews. For tech-savvy Chinese travellers, online behaviours are rather active when they are on holiday. A netnography thus was conducted concurrently to follow and record informants' online behaviours. Differing from other qualitative research strategies, an ethnographic approach allows the researchers to fully immerse with the researched group and gain a "thick description" with culturally stated details (Geertz, 1973). A combination of multi-sited ethnography and netnography offers comprehensive and holistic insights of independent Chinese travellers' tourism dining experience.

After obtaining the ethical approval, informants were approached and recruited from one of the most popular outbound travel forums - Qyer.com. According to Qyer.com, there are more than 100 million active users on this site. Many independent Chinese travellers today find travel companions and form groups on travel forums such as Qyer.com to avoid uncertainty in the destination (Blinded, 2018). These self-organised travel groups normally range from 2-5 people. After obtaining consent from the forum administrator, the lead author started to look for potential informants. Purposive sampling was conducted to form different informant groups in terms of destinations, length of the trip and age to obtain a comprehensive picture of Chinese travellers' dining experience. We also considered variables of different genders,

previous travel experiences, educational levels and occupations when forming these three trips. Although the study does not aim to test these factors, the various individual backgrounds, different group dynamics of informants, and the nature of the trips provided some rich insights of their perceptions of authenticity through tourism dining.

The lead author revealed the identity as a researcher to potential informants and asked to join the travel group as a travel companion, but also as a researcher. After receiving the informants' consent, the data collection started. The lead author identified three different groups of Chinese travellers as informants and travelled with them for data collection purposes.

Both netnography and multi-sited ethnography were conducted on these three journeys. Netnography started from the planning process in the group chat “before” the trip and continued in the “during” and the “after” stages of the trip through capturing social media posts and blogs. In addition to netnography, multi-sited ethnography was conducted during the trip. Using the “follow the people” technique (Marcus, 1995), the lead author travelled with these three groups of independent Chinese travellers and collected rich data of their dining experiences through participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews (Table 1). Immersing with the research group, the lead author talked about food, looked for restaurants, and dined with the informants during the trip. Detailed field notes, conversational interviews, and in-depth interviews, as well as informants' drawings, and social media posts focusing on tourism dining were collected. These techniques triangulate and support each other to obtain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of various stages of authenticity seeking through tourism dining. While organic materials were collected through food-related online posts, dining participant observations and food-related drawings, two sets of interviews were designed per informant and conducted before and after the trip to understand

their sense-making of authenticity through dining experiences (for participants met during the trip, only one interview was conducted).

	pseudonym	gender	age	occupation	past travel experience	participant observation	No. of interviews	WeChat posts	blogs
Spain + Portugal 34 days	Josh	M	25	Master Student	More than 60 countries	✓	2		✓
	Wayne	M	28	Architect	Southeast Asia, China	✓	2	✓	
	Jess	F	24	Undergrad	France, Belgium, China	✓	2	✓	
	Lydia	F	24	Master Student	Europe		1		
	Ted	M	30	Accountant	Southeast Asia, Europe		1		
	Sam	M	34	Self-employed	Europe, South Asia, America		1		
	Lily	F	21	Undergrad	China		1		
UK 16 days	Kay	F	42	Marketing	New Zealand, Southeast Asia, Japan, South Asia, Iran, Morocco, Europe, China	✓	2	✓	✓
	Jane	F	45	HR	Australia, Japan, Southeast Asia, China, Eastern Europe	✓	2	✓	
	Ruth	F	45	Trading	Sri Lanka, Europe, Southeast Asia, Australia, China	✓	2	✓	
Poland 7 days	Emma	F	31	IT	Europe, Southeast Asia, America, Turkey, West Asia	✓	2	✓	✓
	Lena	F	35	IT	Europe, America, China		1	✓	
	Jake	M	29	IT	GCC, Europe, US, Southeast Asia		1	✓	
	Harry	M	24	Master Student	China, Northern Europe		1		

Table 1: Trip Details and Informant Profile

As a qualitative study, we value the significant role of researchers in the process of theory development and creation. The lead author reflexively engaged in the process of data

collection with a duo-role of the “human-self” and the “researcher-self”. Being a Chinese, the lead author positioned himself as an experienced independent traveller. In addition to participant observation field notes, the lead author also kept reflexive notes to critically reflect and engage with the “independent traveller self” in the group dynamics and experience co-creation. Reflexively, informants were cautious about the lead author’s “researcher role” at the early stage of the trip. Sharing similar cultural backgrounds and enthusiasm for food and travel, the lead author soon integrated into the travel group; the informants treated the lead author more as a travel companion rather than as a researcher.

Overall, three sets of comprehensive field notes of participant observations, 21 interview transcripts, drawings, reflexive diaries, social media posts, and blogs were collected. A two-stage thematic analysis was conducted in this study. In the first round of coding, we identified episodes when informants perceived and practised “authenticity”. In the second round of coding, we used terminologies of performance studies borrowed from theatre such as “script”, “choreography” and “stage” to inform the coding process and develop themes under the framework of performance metaphors. Overall, 5 themes emerged, the script, choreography and rehearsal; directed performance; performing the script of familiarity and culture code; improvisation; and the stage, which is discussed in the next section.

4. Findings

4.1. The Script, Choreography and Rehearsal

In this study, the script is understood as travel information and e-WoM platforms that socially construct tourists' perception of the food in the destination. Characterised as well-prepared (Xiang, 2013) and with strong interests in food on holiday (Chang et al., 2010), independent Chinese travellers had sought advice and gathered information about local food long before the trip started. Influenced by the “scripts”, most informants had a relatively clear idea of the destination's cuisines before the holiday. In the online chat groups before our trips, informants shared many blogs and guides with tips of “must visit” restaurants, cafes and food markets, such as Pastéis de Belém in Lisbon, Sally Lunn's in Bath, La Boqueria Food Market and Els 4Gats in Barcelona. For the Spain and Portugal trip, the emoji of Paella and Sangria were used for the group name (reflexive notes). Scripted by these guides and recommendations, independent Chinese travellers developed a perception of authentic local food before the visit.

Choreography and rehearsal in this context are understood as the actions of following the “script” to plan and prepare for the local food consumption. By reading into the details of the dish descriptions with photos, Chinese travellers imaginarily travelled to the restaurant before the actual trip took place. Some informants took their dining experiences on holiday very seriously: after having a shortlist of restaurants from her research on TripAdvisor and travel guidebooks, Emma conducted, in her term, “interviews” with these restaurants by checking out their servicescape, as well as the menu and vibe as part of the sightseeing itinerary before making the final decision. Emma thus went through a “full-dress rehearsal” not only preparing imaginarily but also rehearsing the script by pre-connecting with the restaurant through physical proximity. Emma only dined in restaurants that passed the “full-dress

rehearsal” (field notes). Given much shorter holiday allowances than their Western counterparts, Chinese travellers choreograph and rehearse the script well for every potential authentic encounter through food.

4.2. *Directed Performance*

Based on my source from honglingjin.co.uk, Betty’s is one of the best places to have afternoon tea in North England. The price is reasonable, and we are not required to dress formally like Ritz. We paid a visit the first thing after arriving, York. To fulfil our English dream, we ordered a traditional afternoon tea based on bloggers’ recommendations. Sitting by the window, enjoying the timeless environment, we had a tasted of English royalty (Kay, blog).

Influenced by media and literature, Chinese travellers perceive the UK as a destination of manner, refinement, and royalty, with strong symbolic images such as that of the royal family and the English afternoon tea. Having a traditional afternoon tea was considered a great way to experience English culture by Chinese travellers. We found that our informants were largely directed by e-WoM platforms as scripts in the destination when deciding on their dining options: *“I wouldn’t randomly step into any restaurants without checking TripAdvisor”* (Lena, interview, Kraków). From the same trip, Emma confirmed the use of the TripAdvisor to seek authenticity in the dining experience: *“checking TripAdvisor rating is a must! I don’t want to take any risks to fall into those tourist traps”*. Working as an IT consultant in an international firm, Emma valued her time and wanted to maximise her experience through dining: *“If you spend a little bit more time and effort on research, the experience will be much better. TripAdvisor and Google can definitely help me finding inexpensive and delicious local cuisine”*. Moreover, when sitting in these restaurants they had

already studied, many informants consulted the “script” in detail again to guide them on what to order. *“After sitting down, Jane browsed the webpage she saved about Sally Lunn’s. We all ordered the same based on the recommendations from the blog. And she double-checked about the order by showing pictures on her phone, and laughed: ‘just in case’”* (participant observation, Bath).

During the trip, informants followed the “script” of recommended restaurants and consumed their perceived authenticity through scripted performances: *“the first night in Barcelona, we went to a restaurant found in TripAdvisor, ranked No.8 by Spanish food. We ordered Sangria, Paella, tapas, everything we could think of that representing Spanish food. My informants seemed to not care about tapas is originally from southern Spain, not Barcelona”* (reflexive note). We drank Sangria throughout the trip and even checked the recipe to make our version of Sangria to adjust our taste in Cordoba. *“That is so Spanish!”* Josh could not hide excitement after the first sip of his Sangria (participant observation). By consuming and making their perceptions of local food, Chinese travellers provide their interpretations of the “script” during the search for authenticity in the situated environment.

Following the script, Jess and I checked the “must visit” Pastéis de Belém with our local friend Margarita. When trying the world-famous custard tart, Margarita recommended sprinkling cinnamon powder on the top of the tart. Jess was a bit resistant at the beginning but managed to try for the second tart; she looked at us with sparkles in her eyes: *“that is the right way of doing it, oh my god, I have been eating it the wrong way!”* (participant observation, Belém). Chinese travellers, in this case, experienced authenticity through practising the travel guidebook’s script with the assistance of local advice. Authenticity thus is experienced variously in the directed performance. Chinese travellers go into the destinations with their perceptions of authentic cuisines; thus, the authenticity is perceived and confirmed through making their version of “local food” or consuming food in the

restaurants appeared in the script. In this case, the place myth and symbolic representation of destinations have been re-emphasised in a hermeneutic circle (Urry & Larsen, 2011) through the performance of tourists. In addition to confirming the imaginary authenticity, small local touches further emphasise the perception of authenticity.

4.3. *Performing the script of familiarity and culture code*

We found the deeply embedded Chinese food culture played a significant role in how independent Chinese travellers perceived and consumed foreign cuisine. Some informants brought in the script of daily ritual practices and cultural codes in their trips. Chinese instant noodles, as the ontological comfort of home (Chang et al., 2010), create a buffering space for independent Chinese tourists who seek authentic food experiences through travel. Emma brought five packs of instant noodles for the trip to Poland. Rather different from her enthusiasm of trying local cuisines for lunches and dinners, she usually cooked a bowl of noodle soup for breakfast: *“as a Chinese, I am still used to have something warm and comfy for breakfast”* (conversational interview, Poland). For the trip in Spain and Portugal, although informants were amazed by the local food, they still sought “a taste from home” from time to time: *“Wayne and Josh located a nearby Chinese supermarket the first thing after dropping the luggage. Initially, they planned to have noodles for tomorrow’s breakfast but instead cooked a pod immediately regardless of having a Spanish restaurant booked for dinner in 2 hours’ time”* (participant observation, Cordoba). The script of daily rituals can function as a haven for Chinese travellers when authentic food experiences become too much.

Similar to Chinese sojourners (Yen et al., 2018), Chinese travellers referred to the culturally coded script and used the familiar food to guide them through their interpretations of new food. During the trip through Poland, Emma compared the Polish dumplings with Chinese dumplings and concluded: *“our dumplings are way better”*. Chinese cultural codes as scripts,

also “direct” independent Chinese travellers’ performances. For instance, the idea of sharing tapas was favoured by informants in Spain: *“this is a bit like our Chinese way of eating, ordering different dishes on the table and we can share”* (Lily, interview). Even in destinations where sharing dishes were not the norm, informants tended to order different dishes and tried each other’s food. Kay observed this behaviour: *“I find that only us doing it (trying each other’s food), look at other tables, everyone is concentrating on their own plate”* (conversational interview, Glasgow).

4.4. *Improvisation*

Some informants showed different opinions with the given script. Instead of following the script, they decided to improvise the performance. British food has a rather bad reputation in China. During the UK trip, Kay and Ruth praised British cuisine and questioned the negative reputation: *“my perception towards British food has been totally reshaped. I don’t know why media and bloggers portrait a negative image of British food. Before the trip, I never consider trying it; I never think I will like it. But so far, I don’t even miss Chinese food. I really love the food here, and even want to learn how to cook British food”* (Ruth, interview).

In Cordoba, several restaurants on our wish-list were closed due to the summer holiday season, we had no choice by tried our luck to a small local restaurant. The owner did not speak English. Wayne used his body language to ask for pen and paper. We started to draw (Figure 1) and use body language to communicate with the owner about the food we would like to order. The food was not what we expected. My dish was delicious, but Josh really struggled to finish his. But all of us were amused by the whole experience (participant observation, Cordoba).



Figure 1: Drawing to Communicate with the Restaurant Owner

Both Wayne and Josh recalled this fun experience at the end of this journey. Although the intercultural communication was relatively superficial, by improvising out of the script, Chinese travellers had a taste of authentic customs and resulted in a positive, memorable experience.

Local restaurants not designed purely to attract tourists were enjoyed fairly well by informants. They sometimes felt excited to have this experience that service staff did not speak, or spoke poor English, as a sign of authenticity (Jang et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2017).

In Seville, Jess and I were on the way to a recommended restaurant for lunch but stopped by a quirky local place. Comparing with those famous restaurants, this tapas bar was rather low-key – did not have a long queue outside with travellers around the world holding travel guidebooks, instead occupied by locals and presented with a simple menu written in Spanish on the blackboard. The staff were extremely friendly but spoke poor English. Jess suggested to avoid an accident by randomly ordering, so

we asked the owner to help us choose four tapas dishes for us to share. We were so happy with the food, the service, and the atmosphere that was created. Jess kept saying we found the hidden gem of Seville. I truly found this unexpected encounter was an authentic experience (field note, Seville).

During the interview at the end of the trip, Jess recalled this experience in Seville when asking about her perception of Spain: *“before visiting, Spain is just about abstract and blurred images of Gaudi, Sangria and great weather. But now, if you ask me again what is ‘Spain’ to me, I’d say the small restaurant we went to. It had everything I experienced about Spain – friendly locals, delicious tapas, and time well spent. People enjoy spending time on meals here, they chat for hours over food; they share, they laugh. It is beautiful”* (interview, Madrid). Through the embodied improvisation in dining experiences, Jess reconstructed her perception of Spain and validated her perception of authenticity.

Not all the improvised experiences were positive; there were several accidents during the trip:

It was not lunchtime yet, but we decided to grab some lunch before leaving Granada. Places we ‘starred’ on google map hadn't opened yet for lunch, so we ended up with having lunch at a local restaurant on our way to the train station. The staff of the restaurant did not speak English, and the menu was in Spanish too. We randomly ordered the first three dishes shown on the menu, and the food served was completely different from our expectation – extremely salty! We couldn't finish the food; in order to show our respect, we decided to ask for take-away. For the rest of the trip, we still mentioned this lunchtime to time. Josh said: ‘I feel I was poisoned by the salt’ (field note, Granada).

Although not appreciating some food, with surprise, informants experienced a broader and more complex sense of authenticity.

Some informants were “playful” during the trips by adjusting their diets to accommodate the host. In Scotland, after checking in a guest house in Thurso, we found out the host was a vegetarian. When being asked about choices for next day’s breakfast, Kay said: *“oh, I am a vegetarian too, I would like to have vegetarian breakfast”*, then she winked at us. After returning to our room, we burst into laughter. Ruth jokingly accused Kay of being a big meat eater and lied to the host (participant observation). Kay explained this playfulness as a way to *“do as the Romans do”*, not only getting to know the host’s lifestyle better but having more profound connections with locals: *“I feel eating local food is my way to experience and practice locals' lifestyle. The local food developed in this region must be the best for people living in this environment. For example, European people are used to drinking cold water. I was quite resistant in the first place. But now I try my best to adjust myself to accept it, as I believe this is the right way to immerse and understand the local culture. If you drink hot tea and eat rice all the time, what is the point of travelling abroad?”* (Kay, interview, York).

4.5. *The Stage*

Material and social affordances, understood as the “stage” in performance, plays a crucial role in supporting and facilitating independent Chinese travellers’ search for authenticity. In Warsaw, although Emma was not impressed by Polish dumplings, she was very interested in the traditional decorations of the restaurants. For Emma, the servicescape ticked all the boxes of perceiving Poland as a destination. The Polish folk art in the restaurant with the combinations of flowers and roosters in beautiful colours really caught her eyes. She walked around the restaurants with her camera after ordering the food, took a few photos ... She started to play with the napkins on the table. The napkins came with beautiful Polish patterns; she “investigated” these napkins for a while, and smiled: *“they are so cute, I do not want to use them! ... Although the food is a bit average, I really find this restaurant is very authentic; it is just the food that does not suit my taste”* (interview).

For the UK trip, informants also perceived authenticity through the servicescape offered at a Bed and Breakfast. When having breakfast, we started to play with the toast rack, egg cups, and elegant tea sets. We were amazed by the host's attention to detail in creating an "authentic English experience" (field note, Thurso). Kay could still recall it by the end of the trip:

Remember the one in Northern Scotland? From the use of the colour with combinations of sapphire and gold, and the layout of the furniture, to details such as the colour of the bin and the napkin both fit the theme of the dining room, they altogether create the feeling of British standard of hospitality, and we can tell the host comes from a big family, which is very detail-oriented (Kay, interview, Cambridge).

We also found out that the way food was being served and presented afforded various experiences in terms of authenticity seeking. Through observations, dishes such as tapas based on the idea of sharing afforded more opportunities of conversations and an intra-group communication: "*sharing delicious food, making fun of ridiculous Spanish dinner time, and expressing how jealous we are of the slow pace here, we took our time to share the dishes, and chats about so many things. This meal really makes me feel bringing us together*" (reflexive note, Granada). Similar to tapas sharing, we found that self-catering apartments also afforded a deeper level of intra-group communication through actively performing:

Kay and I cooked dinner tonight. Everyone is helping out: setting up the table, pouring the wine, and cleaning up after the meal. We had such a lovely time 'making the meal' together, and everyone seems opening up more after these collaborative tasks. Jane and Kay started to talk about their work and personal lives. This is the first time our conversations reached a deeper level (participant observation, Lake District).

Authenticity in this context has gone beyond the food and developed towards genuine interpersonal relations.

Social media acted as an effective stage that facilitated interactions between performers and their audience in the matter of authenticity seeking via food. Many food-related posts were shared through informants' social media platforms. Some of these posts reflected "improvisation" (Figure 3), whilst others were associated with "directed performance" (Figure 2). Throughout three trips, the lead author observed that informants were not only keen on sharing their food experiences instantly but also regularly checked the comments on their posts and engaged in playful conversations with their friends online. Ruth, who posted pictures of most meals during her holiday, commented frankly: *"I really enjoyed sharing my experience through WeChat, it is not just a diary for me, but friends can also see what I am up to and comment on it. I like to reply to their comments; it is part of the fun for the trip"* (interview, Cambridge). When making a post, Chinese travellers did make an extra effort to find the best angle and used filters for the food. *"The more effort you put on, the more comments and likes (on the post) you will get"*, Ted explained (interview, Madrid). Maintaining statusphere through posts and replying to comments on social media (Paris, 2011) is a key process of Chinese travellers to re-emphasise and authenticate their dining experiences.



Figure 2: Directed Performance



Figure 3: Improvisation

Furthermore, the online platform afforded a critical “stage” for Chinese travellers to reflect and evaluate the scripts that shaped their initial perceptions of authenticity after the trip. Kay, in her blogs in serialised form on Qyer.com, provided detailed accounts that challenged the stereotyping of the British cuisine:

Slow cook lamb legs, Haggis, these traditional Scottish dishes are extremely welcome by us foodies. This was the first time I came across Haggis. It contains sheep's organs, mixed with herbs and spices. Cooked on a slow fire, and the shape looks like a slice of steak meat, but tastes much smoother with a strong lamb flavour... The way it is cooked, the special lamb smell became a taste of sweetness in the mouth with multiple layers.

Different from instant sharing on social media platforms, Kay did background research when writing the blog. She checked various sources, including the restaurants’ websites, the

ingredients of unfamiliar foods, and the history and origin of certain types of dining behaviour:

English tea was originally designed for wealthy ladies to kill time between 3.30 and 5 pm. Due to the casual form without compromising the elegance and delicacy, the afternoon has become popular since then. The posh version – afternoon tea has been introduced in luxury hotels and restaurants; consuming afternoon tea has become a symbol of social status nowadays.

By checking the “references” and incorporating them in updating the script, Chinese travellers provide their authentic interpretations of combining their embodied experiences and information checking.

5. Conclusion

This study uses performance theory as the theoretical framework to explore independent Chinese travellers' authenticity seeking that goes beyond representational perceptions and engages in the process of doing and sense-making through dining experiences. The performance theory, with the emphasis on affordance, non-representational and multisensory perspectives, provides a new theoretical lens to examining independent Chinese travellers' authenticity seeking processes through tourism dining. Both the symbolic meaning of food and the situated context of "the place" were explored and dynamically interplayed with the changing perceptions through the tourism dining journey.

Independent Chinese travellers' perception of authenticity has evolved throughout the journey. Before the trip, their perception of authenticity constructed by media, literature, and secondary sources was rather abstract, symbolic, and representational. During the trip, Chinese travellers navigated through a series of episodes of authenticity perception and execution. On one hand, the symbolic destination image represented through food was emphasised by performing the "scripted" authenticity; on the other, the improvisation to the contrary of the "script", playful interactions with locals and unpredictable encounters created memorable experiences. In addition, Chinese culture codes and dining habits not only provided a haven to buffer the cultural confusion during the authenticity seeking but also became a reference when understanding new food. Moreover, the material and social affordances enabled the performance of authenticity not only through the consumption of the servicescape or the way of dining but also through the statusphere and the blogosphere of sharing, critiquing and authenticating.

Independent Chinese travellers thus move between directed performance and improvised play, as well as seek the novelty and familiarities in the process of perceiving, understanding,

appreciating, and rejecting authenticity. From playful multisensory encounters, and changes of perception, to deconstructing or re-emphasising the destination image, the perception of authenticity is negotiated and developed through the process of performance.

This study contributes to the literature on the perception of authenticity by using the lens of the performance theory to provide detailed insights into the process of experienced authenticity. Whilst acknowledging the postmodernist approach, we explored this concept through the perspective of constructive authenticity, making theoretical contributions to its subjective understanding and the socially constructed interpretations. In addition, by providing a detailed account of independent Chinese travellers' dining experiences, this article contributes to understanding the dining behaviours of increasingly popular independent Chinese outbound segment, as well as filling the gap of the overlooked authenticity seeking through tourism dining in the non-Western context. Furthermore, the mobile ethnography of independent Chinese travellers offers a close examination of the multisensory and embodied performance in search of authenticity throughout the whole travel journey.

Three implications for practice for stakeholders were identified in this study. First, destination marketers need to revisit their symbolic food images in their promotional materials to showcase the diversity of local cuisines that the destination can offer, but also adjust the expectations and broaden the understanding of international visitors. Second, opportunities to develop mobile applications or augmented reality food guides will assist Chinese travellers in buffering cultural confusions and avoid misunderstanding in the tourism dining experiences. Third, Destination Management Organisations and local businesses should make appropriate use of Chinese social media (e.g. WeChat) with customised contents of local food to target Chinese travellers and encourage them to generate positive eWoM contents.

Some limitations were identified in this study. First, only independent Chinese travellers in small groups were investigated, which cannot fully represent all independent Chinese travellers in Europe. Second, fieldwork was conducted in Spain, Portugal, Poland, and the UK, and although it showed diverse culinary cultures, it cannot fully represent Europe as a whole. Third, the study only focused on the on-site dining behaviour and experience and did not consider individuals' dining behaviours and preferences on a daily basis, which might influence how they perceive tourism dining.

To extend the literature on tourism dining in the non-Western context, future research should focus on sampling travellers from other cultural backgrounds. In addition, a quantitative approach can be conducted to examine independent Chinese travellers' dining preferences and satisfaction abroad. Furthermore, new theoretical lenses such as non-representational theory, symbolic destination image, hermeneutic circle, memorable experiences, or affordance theory are encouraged in future studies to bring in further insights of synthesising the “doing” of authenticity.

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