

FOOD, AUTHENTICITY AND TRAVEL:  
A STUDY OF STUDENTS TRAVELING TO CHINA FOR THE FIRST TIME

by

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And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages. Do not go from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you (Luke 10:7-8 English Standard Version).

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to analyze and recognize how the first time traveler's perception of authenticity, based on the local cuisine and encounters with staged authenticity, affect their overall perception of the experience itself. The research question was what role does food play in participants' construction of an authentic travel experience during their first trip to China? Qualitative methods of pre-and post-trip focus groups coupled with participant observation were used. The study found that participants' view of authenticity changed throughout the study. This change occurred through relationships participants established with the local population, allowing them to experience back regions of authenticity through personal experience. This research is important for college and university study abroad programs to help students take away more from their traveling experiences.

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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

Authenticity is something that many individuals seek through their travel experiences. As MacCannell (1976) has suggested, people who feel alienation in their daily working lives seek out authenticity through their travels to return home, feeling as if they have experienced some part of history and culture outside of themselves. While in search of authenticity through travel, many individuals find themselves experiencing new foods that are unique to the particular areas in which they travel. These foods and the process of consuming them are crucial to the experience of authenticity when traveling (Heldke, 2003).

When examining food, tourism and globalization, there has been a shift, due to technological advances and the world becoming “smaller.” It is possible for individuals to see and learn more about the world from the comfort of their homes due to the Internet. This increase of technology has also led to the rise in franchised restaurants. There are now McDonalds and other fast food chains worldwide. Within these organizations, there is a certain level of homogeneity, making similar foods available in numerous countries (Ritzer, 2004). While these types of eateries are on the rise, there are still places that are locally owned across the globe that offer regional favorites for the customers that live in or travel to that area. Some locations are better known for their popular dishes and cuisines than others, but regardless, when one travels there is a difference in locally-owned foods in various parts of the world (Heldke, 2003). Also, certain franchised restaurants, such as KFC or McDonalds, are able to model and design their various

locations worldwide to cater to their diverse audiences, while at the same time still maintaining some sort of similarity with the brand name. For instance, if a person were to go to the McDonalds or KFC in their hometown in America and then visit the same chain in Beijing, they would note that while the name was still the same and some of the foods were similar, there would also be major differences. A perfect example of this is would be the McDonalds in India, which does not serve any cow meat - this is completely different than what is served in the United States. These characteristics of similarity and differences are further proof of how intricate and complex the term “authenticity” is and the search for it can be. While in China, the responses the participants had to the food and chain restaurants such as these were important in the findings of this study.

Food is a means through which travelers seek to better understand a culture and people and where many travelers focus much of their time. When searching for a more authentic traveling experience, food can positively or negatively affect the outcome of a first time visit to a country. This was critical when examining data obtained from this study because all of the participants involved in this study were first time visitors to China. Many travelers experience front regions when traveling. MacCannell (1973) describes a front region as an area that is set up to be perceived as an authentic cultural space but is actually for tourists. These front regions are contrasting to back regions, which are areas where local people work and live (MacCannell, 1973). If a traveler seeks to find an authentic back region and all they can find is inauthentic, front regions, they might feel dissatisfied with their experience. The same is true in the reverse situation. Even if the food is authentic to the location, if the authenticity the traveler is seeking is

that of a front region or a false perception, then they may not be pleased when met with a back region.

Since westerners have an idea of what they think Chinese cuisine will taste, look and smell like, based on what they are accustomed to in their home countries, this may cause confusion among Western travelers in regards to the food in China. In most cases, first time travelers' perceptions of what traditional or authentic Chinese food will be like is some form of staged authenticity. This may seem authentic to travelers because it is all they have ever known as "Chinese food."

An example of this is sweet and sour chicken in America. Many would think of this food and immediately reference it to Chinese food. But in China, sweet and sour chicken is not a common dish. Pork is consumed more than chicken and the closest dish would be pork with a similar sauce, although it would still taste very different. When travelers visit China, the food they come in contact with may be different than what they are used to experiencing. This exposure to back regions while on their first trip to China might affect the authenticity they see or experience through their food during their travel.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Although food has a distinct effect on the overall first time travel experience of an individual in regards to authenticity (Hjalager & Richards, 2002), there is a lack of research documenting first time visitors' experiences with the cuisine. For this thesis I conducted an interpretive case study to examine the cuisine experiences of first time travelers to China. The study was guided by the following question: What role does food play in participants' construction of an authentic travel experience during their first trip to China?

The study was conducted in China in the southeastern part of the country in the Fujian Province with an approximate population of 36,930,000 persons. The participants were identified through World Vision, an organization that has a program that sends individuals to China to teach English and culture classes. World Vision has been sending groups of volunteers to China for over eight years in an attempt to help meet needs of the people in China as well as enlighten the American participants on this culture and people. This organization seeks to send individuals to China to share their knowledge of English and American culture with the Chinese. In return the participants are able to learn from the Chinese people about their culture through first-hand experience of living life on a day-to-day basis with the individuals.

The last several days of the trip, the participants planned to spend some time touring places such as the Great Wall of China, the Summer Palace and Tiananmen Square. There were six participants who met the requirements of this study: the trip was their first trip to China and they were all college students. The participants were individuals from middle to upper-class families, which positioned them as more privileged than some other people who may not have the resources to travel. Data was generated via participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and pre- and post-trip focus groups.

Chapter I introduces the research project and gives a brief overview of what the study aimed to accomplish. This chapter includes some background information along with the purpose of the study and the study's research question. The main goal of this chapter is to acquaint the audience with the study's premise and goals as well as lay out a blueprint of the rest of the following chapters.

Chapter II discusses the current scholarship related to travel, food, and authenticity. This chapter gives a more in-depth look at current research referenced in the introduction as well as additional related research topics. Throughout this section, the reader will gain a better knowledge of the subject as well as an understanding of the source of the research and what has not been explored and discussed.

Chapter III outlines the methodology that was used for the research portion of this project. In this chapter, the reasoning behind the chosen methodology will be explained and supported. Information will also be given about the sampling, research, and analysis methods that were used throughout the study.

In Chapter IV, the results and discussion are presented. The results are discussed in detail followed by a discussion section that describes the findings from the results. Finally, Chapter V interprets the findings of the study and concludes with recommendations for future research and professional practice.

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter will provide a detailed view at the literature behind this study. First, food and tourism will be discussed. In this section of the chapter, tourism, the tourist gaze and the theory of the leisure class will be described and elaborated on. Second, authenticity, tourism and food will be elaborated on. Here, the term authenticity will be broken down and examples of how it will be studied in this research will be given. Staged authenticity will also be explained in great detail. Finally, the chapter will conclude with relating this knowledge back to the current study and how this study is relevant to colleges and universities with their study abroad programs.

### **Food and Tourism**

Through this trip, the participants from World Vision traveled to China as a type of unconventional tourist. During their stay, they were supposed to engage in common tourist activities and unconventional experiences. This alternative tourist role began from the time they arrived in China when their translators met them. The translators were locals who worked with the organization or Americans who were living in China and working with the organization. From there, the participants were completely immersed in the people and culture. This contact began with their teaching duties and the interactions with the children they were working with. The participants spent a large amount of time with their assigned translators as they worked through the lessons they had planned. These relationships and the development of them were vital to the success of the teaching time because none of the participants knew how to speak Chinese.

The participants also spent the majority of their time with their students. They had assigned classroom time in which they instructed their students and they were allotted free time where they would play sports or cards with the students. The first two nights of the camp there was a designated free time for all the students where they could choose from various stations to go to and then they spent a little over two hours in that station. This was a good time for the participants to get to know their students better through the arts and crafts, movie making, board games, adventure time and other stations. The Chinese hosts were friendly and welcoming as they were eager to work with and learn from the American participants as well as share about their culture with them.

This was the type of tourism that was experienced the first half of the trip. The last two to three days, the participants were supposed to go visit some iconic places in China, such as the Great Wall of China and the Summer Palace. These activities were booked through a tourism company and they were designed to give participants the typical tourism experience (tour bus, planned meals, hotels, and shopping, etc.). During the closing ceremony of the English camp, the leaders were informed that one of the worst typhoons the area had seen in twenty years was coming toward them. The students were sent home with their parents and the American participants were told they must evacuate to another city before the roads were shut down. This completely changed the plans for the trip and sent the participants to another city where they were essentially on lock down in various homes until the storm passed. The participants were forced into the homes of their new friends and hosts to wait out the storm. The typhoon ended up going around the city, but participants did not get to travel to Beijing.

This was quite disappointing to some of the participants, probably for similar reasons of those associated with Urry's tourist gaze (2002). Urry found that people hear others' stories from their travels and when they travel themselves, as they want to mimic the experiences of others. An example of this would be the hundreds of thousands of people who have their portraits made inside British telephone booths every year. This is an iconic sight that many travelers to England feel that if they do not experience, then they have not really visited the place (Urry, 2002).

Instead of being able to go to the iconic sights of China, some of the translators took the participants around the city they were staying in and showed them one of the oldest streets that they call Seven Lanes Three Alleys. This trip was designed to be a trip in which participants experienced alternative and conventional methods of tourism, making this study lean toward a hybrid type of tourism. After the changes to the design of the trip, this would be more considered an unconventional type of tourism than a typical version.

Although this type of tourism is uncommon, it still fits into the typical description for tourism solely through the definition of a tourist. A tourist has been defined by the World Tourism Organization as a person who travels to another country for more than twenty-four hours for the purposes of leisure (recreation, religion, sport, study, health or holiday), business, family, or mission (Leiper, 1979). Traditional tourism has been summarized as various activities that well-off people partake in, which may be seen at resorts or nice locations and long tours or trips (Towner, 1995). This study, while exhibiting the non-traditional nature, still fits into this category. The participants were individuals who come from middle to upper-class homes and are thus classified as "well-

off.” Since the individuals were conducting volunteer work, many of them received funding from family and friends to support their trip. This places them in a category that the typical individual would not fall into.

Tourism dates back as far as the times of ancient Greece and Rome (Towner, 1995), and the practice has existed to a greater or lesser extent ever since. While tourism has been a common practice that has continued to evolve and change for millennia, there is a growing scholarly interest in the consumption of food as it relates to the experience of tourism (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). One must eat to survive (Maslow 1943); however, eating is about more than survival and pleasure (Douglas, 1984). Since individuals need food to sustain them, oftentimes social events are structured around food and its consumption. Think of parties; many involve food and for some, food can be the highlight of the event. Food and its consumption are important repositories for symbolic meaning with regards to different cultures (Hjalager & Richards, 2002). Various cultures have staple dishes for different reasons. Understanding why a certain society eats a type of dish is a small glimpse into the traditions and values of a people group. These are clues that must be investigated to discover the meaning behind them, which is often overlooked. An example of this is the tradition in America of eating a can of black-eyed peas on New Year ’s Day as a form of good luck. To many people without knowing the story behind the tradition it would be a meaningless ritual.

Technology and westerners’ fast paced society has a lot to do with skimming over these important cultural clues. As the modern world becomes more and more advanced and traveling becomes easier for individuals from middle to upper-class homes, going global is a trend that is prevalent in society (Hackney, Boggs, & Borozan, 2012). Many

individuals are no longer satisfied with small-scale vacations and holidays, since traveling farther has become easier due to technology (such as airplane and computer advances), many individuals wish to explore the world at every chance.

This points toward Veblen's theory of the leisure class (1899), where he asserted that individuals were beginning to use leisure as a status symbol. They would travel to have bragging rights about all of the places they had been to or things they had experienced. He proposed this theory in 1899 and since then, there have been numerous advances in technology and means of communication. It would only make sense that with inventions such as social media, individuals now have more means to use their travel and leisure experiences for bragging. While there are many benefits that have come from technological advances, this would be a negative result.

With these advances, the job market is becoming more and more competitive and there is a strong focus on global issues. At colleges and universities around the world, study abroad travel is also on the rise (Hackney, Boggs, & Borozan, 2012). This global mindset is in part due to the ever-growing need for individuals to be less ethnocentric and more globally minded to be more competitive in the job market (Pineda, 2009). The world is "becoming smaller" and more interconnected due to an increase of technology (Friedman, 2007), this includes advances in travel modes (airplanes, cruise ships, high speed trains, etc. . . ), search engines which allow technology at the touch of a button and advanced communication systems where two people one the other side of the world can talk to one another through phone or even video.

Despite all of these increases in technology, individuals can only learn so much from technology (Presley, Damron-Martinez & Zhang, 2010). Students who only learn

from what they are being shown through media are obtaining a very shallow version of the truth, if the truth is being told. Many media outlets have an agenda to push and thus what they discuss or share to the public is only half of the real story. These facts alone can easily lead many students to draw certain conclusions based on their limited westernized knowledge that may not depict an accurate picture (Durbin, 2006). There is a greater depth of knowledge that may be “obtained experience,” this kind of knowledge must be acquired through being in direct and immediate contact with a given culture and people (Kim & Goldstein, 2005).

It is for these reasons that students are being advised to develop a more global mindset (Albers-Miller, Prenshaw, & Straughan, 1999; Kim & Goldstein, 2005) and what better way to accomplish that than through travel abroad? Students who finish their college education with a diverse and well-rounded background of community service and travel experience are more likely to succeed and excel in the professional world (Albers-Miller, Prenshaw, & Straughan, 1999; Kim & Goldstein, 2005; Pineda, 2009; Presley et al., 2010). This type of student was the target sample population for the study.

This study focused on students who were traveling in hopes of expanding their cultural knowledge. Through immersion into China, the American students experienced various aspects of Chinese culture, including its cuisine. Chinese food in China is very different than westernized Chinese food (Heldke, 2003), and this study examined how that aspect of the culture affected the overall experience of the trip.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, franchised restaurants are on the rise due to the world becoming “smaller” and advances in technology. George Ritzer, a sociologist whose research focuses on globalization, founded the concept of McDonaldization. He

proposed this McDonaldization was when the ideas and principles of fast-food establishments, such as McDonalds, become prominent in virtually every aspect of American society and spread throughout the world. Americans are so inundated with McDonalds-style organizations that are massive, corporate, un-personal, and generic. What started out with fast food has spread to almost every industry in America and is making its way throughout the world. The American society cares more about instant gratification than quality and thus these organizations have thrived. There is starting to be a shift with some, though, a sort of revolt from this type of lifestyle. Now that American culture is so rooted in these types of institutions, it is hard for people to break away from them and still know how to or have the resources to live apart from these companies (Ritzer, 2008).

From this theory of McDonaldization and his research on it, Ritzer observed what he later called the something-nothing continuum (2007). Ritzer took these two words that people are very familiar with and redefined them, giving them highly specialized meaning. Something is described as being originally conceived and controlled by individuals and exhibiting very unique substance and materials. Conversely, nothing is described as being centrally created and controlled as well as not exhibiting very unique substance and materials (Ritzer, 2007).

An example of this something-nothing continuum can be easily demonstrated through food. When a person goes to a fast food restaurant and they order a cheeseburger, they are essentially ordering nothing because it is merely a generic cheeseburger. There is nothing special about it, it is made based off of a centrally controlled standard and it does not exhibit unique materials or substance. When an individual creates their own meal

from scratch, they are creating something. The food is being originally conceived and controlled by them and is exhibiting very unique substance and materials. They are in control and they can put whatever they want or do not want into their dish because they are creating it.

The concept behind Ritzer's something-nothing continuum is important to this research because many travelers use traveling as a sort of quest or being in search of something (Mannell & Kleiber, 2011). Food is a method through which participants may seek this adventure. There is a lack of research in the topic of how food in a destination country affects students' experiences while traveling for the first time.

### **Authenticity, Tourism, and Food**

As mentioned above, eating when traveling is a means through which travelers try experience a host culture in a more authentic way (Hjalager & Richards, 2002). An individual could not expect to experience a culture without partaking in their cuisine. Since food is such an integral part of life, it is desirable for a traveler to not only see the sights and experience the culture while traveling, but also to eat the cuisine, which is a large part of the people and culture. Food acts as a gateway for travelers to be able to immerse themselves in a culture or society as they venture into the unknown to discover what the 'locals' are eating (Heldke, 2003). Many individuals long for an authentic experience when seeking to discover a culture or society completely, including through their local cuisine.

A large issue is that individuals are skeptical that they are being presented with an authentic experience (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Individuals do have reason to be skeptical according to MacCannell's staged authenticity theory (1973) discussed later in

this section. This skeptical outlook might pose significant issues in regards to individuals' perception of their experience. Within the past ten years, authenticity is a topic that is more mainstream than it has been in the past, and now many scholars are discussing these issues.

Since gastronomy and culinary tourism are both on the rise (Kivela & Crotts, 2009), the topic of authenticity as it relates to food is becoming more relevant. This is promising because researchers understand that food and drink are very expressive of culture, area, and population (Robinson & Clifford, 2012). There are various definitions that attempt to answer the question 'What is authentic food?' Of these definitions, the one that is most commonly agreed upon by scholars is: food that is different or unique, which is different than native authenticity, which is food, made by a certain culture in a specific area (Robinson & Clifford, 2012).

Keeping in mind Robinson and Clifford's definition of what consists of authentic food - that it is expressive of a culture, area or population (2012) - food has been found to act as a medium that almost instantly builds a relationship with the tourist that can give them the authentic cultural feeling (Heldke, 2003). For some individuals, this could mean that upon arrival in China, they went to McDonalds and ate something, and it was the mixture of the familiar brand mixed with the newness of certain flavors and menu items that caused them to immediately feel a sense of ease and comfort in their new environment. Conversely, an individual could arrive in China and go to a restaurant where they could not read anything on the menu, so they pointed when ordering and ate something they had never experienced before. This newness and excitement elicited from the adventure of the unknown could make them feel that they were experiencing the

culture authentically. It is highly important to keep in mind that this level of perceived authenticity by the travelers can depend as much on their own self-identity and personality traits as the actual authenticity of the food (Camus, 2004).

Popular conceptualizations hold that authentic experiences are characterized by sincerity, genuineness, or something that is marked by conformity to a widespread or long-continued tradition (Lau, 2010). While these definitions have an intuitive appeal, researchers have not reached consensus on a universally agreed upon definition for authenticity. Some researchers think it necessary to have a standard definition and others argue that it would be inappropriate to try to codify the word (Rickly-Boyd, 2012).

Various scholars have taken the term and applied it in different ways, of those; several specific types of authenticity have emerged. Relational authenticity has been defined as authenticity that relays a sense of honesty and genuineness between individuals as opposed to distrust (Lau, 2010). An example of object authenticity would be any type of tourist object: relics, activities, procedures, and the like. This differs from relational authenticity in which a phenomenon has genuineness that transcends an immediate social relation (Lau, 2010). Likewise, relational authenticity could be the relational experience a tourist might have with a local while traveling (Lau, 2010).

While all of these types of authenticity are valid and relevant for certain types of studies, this study uses existential authenticity, a concept proposed by Wang (1999), which he defines as a state of being that is normally triggered by tourism experiences. Existential authenticity refers to an existential state of being or the potential of one that is triggered by tourist activities.

An example of this would be two avid baseball fans. One enjoys watching the game and feels like he is experiencing existential authenticity by sitting on his couch in his living room, with all of his baseball paraphernalia on. With the surround sound turned up, a cold beer in his hand and some popcorn, hotdogs and peanuts, he feels like he is completely a part of the game. The other fan loves nothing more than to be sitting in the stands, listening to the crowds cheer as he smells the popcorn and hotdogs from the vendors around him. Being there with people all around him cheering for his team, smelling the fresh cut grass and knowing that a ball could come his way any time makes him feel like he is a part of the experience. Both of these fans are experiencing existential authenticity in their own ways. They both feel as if they are authentically experiencing baseball when they are in their diverse surroundings. It is more about the overall experience they are having as opposed to the objects.

As described above, existential authenticity can have nothing to do with objects that a traveler would tour (Wang, 1999). This is an “activity-related” form of authenticity as opposed to being object-oriented; it focuses mostly on the state of being and not certain things or objects (Wang, 1999). Along with existential this study also examines staged authenticity, which ties into existential authenticity.

Existential authenticity is a concept that has been a part of psychological research for many years and has only recently been applied by tourism scholars (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Wang stated that travelers are more “freely self-expressed than in everyday life because they are engaging in non-ordinary activities, free from the constraints of the daily” (1999, p. 351) and more themselves when experiencing existential authenticity. MacCannell has also argued that tourists search for authentic

experiences because their lives are so mundane and boring that they long to escape from that and experience other people's lives through various cultures when traveling (MacCannell, 1999).

One of MacCannell's theories is that while seeking this authentic experience, travelers can fall victim to staged authenticity. Authenticity is staged when destination locals do not want tourists to invade their spaces so they set up front and back regions. These regions are described by MacCannell as, "the front is the meeting place of hosts and guests or customers and service persons, and the back is the place where members of the home team retire between performances and relax to prepare" (1973, p. 590), meaning that what happens in the back regions is more authentic and real than what happens in the front.

The problem with this idea of staged authenticity, as MacCannell later explained, is the same problem researchers have with the definition of authenticity: not everything is black and white; there are many gray areas (Wang, 1999). Some destinations have staged back regions along with actual back regions (MacCannell, 1976, 1999). Due to the various levels of staged authenticity there are different implications for types of travelers. As Pearce and Moscardo (1986) have asserted, whether or not tourists are satisfied with their travel experience depends on several elements: the perceptions the travelers have, a complete examination of the tourist environment and the traveler's need or desire for authenticity. Some travelers will care if the environment and food is staged, whereas others might not mind and may prefer it to be staged to better accommodate their preferences. Staged authenticity can be seen in the tourism field, but researchers must understand that while examining it, there are not always clear-cut distinctions between

the various regions (MacCannell, 1973, 1976, 1999). This impacts educational travel where students are going to a foreign country to experience more fully the culture and people. If they are met with these staged regions, this will make their journey to seek out what the culture is like on a day-to-day basis for the people that live there extremely difficult.

All of these levels of staged authenticity and definitions of authenticity greatly impact travelers' perceptions of food and authenticity when they travel. When traveling, food is not only a means for survival and sustenance, but it is also an essential part to the overall travel experience (Robinson & Clifford, 2012). Food and drink to immerse people deeply in a culture and society while they are traveling, it can take them to places they have never been before and in a sense intimately involve them in spiritual, cultural and spatial places (Sims, 2009). It has been said you are what you eat (Brillat-Savarin, 1826), but there is more truth to that saying than people know. Individuals grow up eating certain types of food that shape their preferences later on in life and these "comfort" foods define individuals, so much so that if someone were to try to take those away or change their eating habits, it is seen as a personal attack in a sense (Hjalager & Richards, 2002). This can greatly affect students when they are traveling. If they are unwilling to be open and to experience the people and culture completely through all of their senses, including the food, it will limit the overall effectiveness of the complete experience (Heldke, 2003).

Understanding how existential authenticity and staged authenticity affect the overall travel experience of tourists is crucial when examining the knowledge obtained by travelers and their overall perception of the experience. Existential authenticity, as

suggested by Stein and Reisinger (2006) is when the state of authenticity is not a static state but one that is transient and that the traveler can slip in and out of because it is purely experience-oriented. They assert that a traveler can only be authentic for a moment in a place and situation and thus argue that there are not inauthentic tourists, merely those who prefer things they know (Stein & Reisinger, 2006). This leads back to MacCannell's concept of staged authenticity (1973, 1976, 1999), where some travelers might prefer to be in situations that are staged, because a familiar front or staged front region would make them more comfortable than an actual back region (Pearce & Moscardo, 1986).

This is important to realize because many students may be comfortable on different levels with the culture and food or some may take more time to recover from culture shock that they might experience. It is important that this study is based on the common knowledge that the various participants may be on different levels of what they consider to be authentic and inauthentic at times throughout the trip.

It is also important to study these factors because when individuals travel, they are in essence setting out on a type of pilgrimage (Belhassen, Caton, & Stewart, 2008). These travelers are removing themselves from their present location to one that might be similar to what they are familiar with or completely foreign (as with most travelers going to China). They are placing themselves in a state of liminality where they are in a new geographic location and in a different psychological state from what they are used to (Wang, 1999). The authenticity of these pilgrimages will be completely unique to each individual based on their own perception of authenticity, locations visited, and personal actions (Belhassen et al., 2008). This must be kept in mind as participants are observed

and when asked questions in focus groups, because the participants' perceptions of their pilgrimage and experience will affect their actions and their answers.

### **Conclusion**

When traveling, authenticity is an important issue in regards to the food and overall experience. The previous scholarship has focused mostly on object-authenticity and how it is related to food and traveling. This study examines individuals traveling to China for the first time and how staged authenticity and existential authenticity relates to their view of cuisine and the overall experience.

The purpose of this study is to analyze and recognize how the first time traveler's perceptions of authenticity are based on the local cuisine and encounters with staged authenticity affect their overall perception of the experience itself. Staged authenticity, for a traveler who is seeking to experience a culture is a hindrance because the traveler may not know what is and is not a back or front region and this can make processing the society more difficult (MacCannell, 1973). The processing and fully understanding a culture may be difficult in itself, due to the students' experiencing culture shock, but by adding front regions, the participants might have a hard time trying to differentiate between what is staged and what is not. For students to experience authenticity, they must break down the barriers of misconceived perceptions and staged regions to be able to delve deeper into a society, partly through the local cuisine, and open their eyes and minds to experiencing the society.

The benefits of this study are numerous but are relevant to colleges and universities in particular. With this knowledge, colleges and universities would be able to better analyze their study abroad programs at various locations, especially with

Chinese locations, and they could make adjustments to their trips based on the findings. These findings will be important to Middle Tennessee State University's relationship with their partnering Chinese university; as well as the study could be duplicated to pertain to other geographical areas (or countries) being studied. The questions and findings would vary based on country and participants, but in essence would be the same study. Middle Tennessee State University has an extensive exchange program with the Hangzhou Normal University of China and offers study abroad trips to China through Kentucky Institute for International Studies (KIIS). This research study could benefit the work being done with both of these institutions and will hopefully improve enrollment numbers. This study will help each individual be able to make the most out of their travel experience.

Other tourism organizations and study abroad programs for colleges and universities could benefit from the study by using the results to examine their programs. They can take the information about how staged authenticity and local cuisine affect the overall perception of authenticity and experience of the trip. From there they can make adjustments to better meet the needs of their participants.

### **CHAPTER III:**

## **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to describe participants' experiences as they travel to China for the first time, paying special attention to their engagement with Chinese cuisine. Given this purpose, I used a qualitative approach to inquiry that allowed me to capture the complexity and ambiguity of the meaning making process (Geertz, 1973).

While on this trip, a typical day for the participants consisted of their teaching English and culture classes to elementary and high school students from 9am until 9pm. The participants would have a briefing over breakfast where they met with other leaders and were informed of the daily schedule. From 9am until 10:30am the students had sports and classroom time. They had a break from 10:30am until 11:00am, where many of the students and participants congregated to play basketball or watch others play basketball. Lunch was served at 11am cafeteria style where many of the participants took turns helping serve at various meals. After lunch, from 12pm until 2pm was a time for students to rest, shower, or do laundry. There was a general assembly at 2pm where the group sang and danced together. From 3pm until 4:30pm the participants helped their classes with their creative projects. There was another break that was often filled with basketball playing and observing from 4:30pm to 5:00pm. Dinner was served at 5:00pm and there was a break from 6:00pm until 7:00pm. At 7:00pm, evening activities started and went until 9:00pm. Then everyone was to go to his or her dorms and get ready for bed. Lights were to be out at 10:00pm. This was the daily schedule for the participants, although in China, everything is planned loosely due to their cultural norms, so it fluctuated with

times. Some people refer to this mindset as “China time,” where the clock does not rule anyone’s schedule.

The trip’s structure had been designed by World Vision to be relational in nature and as a sort of cultural exchange. This was achieved through American participants sharing their knowledge and understanding of their culture and the English language while the Chinese people they interacted with and those people doing the same with their own culture and language.

A general overview of the trip schedule generally consists of the participants arriving in China and spending the majority of their trip teaching English and culture classes with the students. When they were not teaching, they were spending their time exploring Chinese culture and building relationships with the students and translators they were working with. The last two to three days of the trip the participants were supposed to experience a Chinese tour. This did not happen on this trip though due to a typhoon that came in while the participants were there. After the storm had passed, the participants returned back to the states and their trip was concluded.

Much of the research on authenticity related to food and travel experiences has been generated using semi-structured interviewing (Andriotis, 2011; Cole, 2007; Kim & Jamal, 2007; McIntosh & Prentice, 1999). Additionally, a few studies have used surveys and one has conducted a netnography, which is a variation of ethnography that is used online (Robinson & Clifford, 2012; Mkono, 2013). The present study used semi-structured and focus group interviews in an effort to capture participants’ understanding of Chinese culture and cuisine. However, given the exploratory nature of the research and

the need to facilitate “thick description” (Geertz, 1973), I also took on the role of participant observer by traveling to China with research participants.

Focus group interviews were conducted with participants before and after their travel experiences. Focus groups are a viable means of obtaining a large amount of data in a shorter amount of time, as opposed to individual interviews. Another benefit of focus groups over individual interviews is that participants are more likely to feel more comfortable and at ease in a group of people instead of being singled out. There is a possibility that some of the participants were more outspoken than others and this might have made some of the participants less willing to try to speak out. In an attempt to balance out those factors, informal, one on one interviews were conducted throughout the trip and observations were recorded as field notes.

The use of both of these methods was an attempt to receive richer, more meaningful data from the participants. The intent of these interviews was to document participants’ perceptions of Chinese cuisine prior to and after their travel. Focus group discussions were audio recorded for transcription purposes. Extensive notes were also taken throughout the focus groups, which were approximately thirty minutes to an hour in length each.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the trip in an effort to capture changes in participants’ understandings of Chinese cuisine and culture. An interview guide (see Appendix A) was used during the pre-departure and post-trip focus groups. The guide allowed for flexible conversation within specific topic areas, but also ensured that certain issues and topics were addressed during the focus groups. This outline was consistent with Patton’s (2002) description of semi-structured interview design, which

needs to be open and flexible enough to allow exploration while allowing the design to evolve throughout the data collection process.

In my role as a participant observer, I participated in the same activities as other participants (e.g., teaching culture and English classes, playing sports and games with the children). My role as a participant observer was limited with the factors of time and the language. The participants and I were in China for two weeks, which is much shorter than a year, which is typically a minimum when engaging in participant observation. Also, the Chinese language is a very difficult one to learn and I did not spend the time learning it, other than a few phrases the students took the time to teach me. Throughout the experience though, I was cognizant not only of participants' activities and reactions, but my own subjective reactions to the travel experience. Initially, I captured these experiences through jottings, which are short words or phrases that are evocative of larger experiences. These jottings served as the basis of expanded field notes that I composed each evening (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995).

### **Research Participants & Sampling Procedure**

Participants were selected from World Vision through their China Culture and English Class Trip. These participants were purposefully sampled in an effort to target participants whose experiences will generate rich data (Creswell, 2003). Participants range from 18 to 35 years of age, were predominantly of Anglo-European descent, were engaged in some form of post-secondary education, and were raised in middle-class households. The program was composed of four men and two women participants. The study was conducted in China in the southeastern part of the country in the Fujian Province with approximate population of 36,930,000 persons. According to the 2000

census the population is 91.5% Han Chinese and the other 8.5% is a melting pot of over fourteen various ethnicities (“China,” n.d.).

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis commenced with a process of open coding in which I read the field notes and transcripts and assigned short, descriptive codes to portions of data deemed significant in light of the research questions (Charmaz, 2006). Having done so, I used the accumulated list of open codes to create a smaller subset of focused codes. These focused codes were used to code the data a second time and to sort the data into coherent categories. In turn, these categories served as the basis for writing analytic memos in which I described the distinguishing characteristics of each category. After once again being compared to the raw data, the analytic categories described in the memos served to structure the study’s findings.

### **Trustworthiness**

Throughout the process of data generation, steps were taken to improve the trustworthiness of the subsequent data representation. As interview transcripts and field notes were created, I shared these data sources with participants. Commonly called “member checking,” this process allowed participants to address the accuracy of the data.

Further, I shared my initial findings with research participants to elicit feedback regarding my analysis and interpretation of events. My relationship with the participants was unconventional. I have known all of the participants for at least a few months, but the majority of them I had known for two to three years. This gave me a good level of rapport with the participants before the research even began. We were all acquaintances or friends and this allowed them to feel more open and trusting with me.

Finally, I shared my data and initial findings with my advisor, Dr. Dunlap, to facilitate an ongoing dialogue regarding the research process.

## **CHAPTER IV: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Two focus groups were conducted with participants for this study; a pre-departure and post-trip focus group as well as thorough participant observation throughout the trip. What emerged from those outlets over the course of the study were two distinct views on authenticity. The participants had one understanding pre-departure and a completely different understanding post-trip. There were two major themes that impacted the post-trip understanding of authenticity. Those themes were relationships and personal experiences. For the participants to feel as if they have had an authentic travel experience while in China, they needed to make relationships with the students and translators, which opened doors for them to experience aspects of the Chinese culture.

These themes were directly related to authenticity. Below is a detailed breakdown of authenticity. The first section discusses participants' conceptualization of authenticity pre-departure. The second section expounds on their changed outlook by examining the impact that relationships and personal experiences had on the participants.

Authenticity was the main focus point of this study. Participants after their pre-departure focus group displayed that they conceptualized authenticity based off common stereotypes and second hand information they had encountered. The findings of the study yielded that the participants viewed authenticity as something that was historically factual or accurate. This viewpoint spilled over into their views on the cuisine as well. They also considered authentic Chinese cuisine to be fresh, not pre-packaged, prepared at home and culturally rooted. Some of the participants came into the study with a romanticized

viewpoint of authenticity and China; where life in China would be slower and more idyllic than their everyday American lifestyles, which are full of hustle and bustle. Others had an understanding that authenticity in China would be old and traditional, that the food would be strange and inedible; these participants did not have a very positive view.

After returning from their trip, the participants' view of authenticity was an understanding that had been based on relationships established with others through their travels and based on their own first-hand experience. The cuisine played a major role in the construction of an authentic travel experience. Authentic food experiences were those where the participants saw the use of fresh ingredients, traditions, originality, cooked in small quantities by everyday individuals who were not working for a corporate organization and that the participant had a relationship with. These authentic travel experiences that the participants felt were experienced through the relationships they built with the Chinese people they met and came in contact with.

The difference between the participants' understanding of authenticity before their trip and their understanding once they returned is contrasting. There are numerous reasons behind the variance in their understanding of authenticity and one of those reasons is the lack of experience that the participants had with China and the Chinese culture. Many of the participants had traveled several places globally but none of them thought of themselves as well traveled.

Investigator: Do you consider yourselves well traveled? [All of them shook their heads no in unison]

Jake: There are a lot of places I want to go. (Pre-departure)

This lack of personal experience with the culture and people might have influenced the participants' understandings of authenticity, but the two themes - relationships and personal experience - that emerged are directly related to the participants' shift in understanding as will be discussed later on in this chapter.

Below are the pre-departure and post-trip conceptualizations of the participants. These sections will help break down the participants' way of thinking and begin the analysis of authenticity, which ultimately leads into the various themes that emerged, bringing the analysis full-circle.

### **Pre-departure Conceptualizations**

The pre-departure focus group was conducted on Friday, June 28, 2013. This was approximately a week before the participants would depart on their trip. The focus group began with asking participants about their travel experience and experiences they had with Chinese people or culture. Due to the participants' lack of travel experience to China, they lacked a coherent concept of authenticity and their understanding of it. Some of the participants were more sure of themselves and their understanding of authenticity, while others wavered in their understanding. Both those who were and were not sure of their perceptions found that their understandings of authenticity changed once they arrived in China. Although the participants did not agree on a single understanding of authenticity, the concept was important to them and was brought to the discussion by their reflections on authenticity with the trip.

The participants introduced authenticity during the pre-departure focus group, which signified that the concept is one that they truly cared about and were interested in pursuing related to their travel. Also, the participants introduced the topic of food in the

study as well, when asked about their experiences with the Chinese culture, cuisine and their understandings of what they thought was and was not authentic were discussed at the outset of the interview. A participant named Zach captured the importance of food for constructing a concept of authenticity, when explained:

Zach: Food's just such a big part of your daily life anywhere. If you don't eat you, or at least I do, I have a terrible day. So like I don't know, it's just food is one of the huge defining factors of all countries. I mean all countries are known for their food in some way or another, whether good or bad. So it is such an integral part, is what I am trying to say. (Pre-departure)

In regards to the food, the participants defined authenticity itself in various ways. Origins of the cuisine were one of the defining characteristics for the participants. Some of them thought that the measure of authenticity of a food was based solely off the origin of the recipe. This may seem extreme, to think of tracing every recipe back to its origin. To some of the participants, however, the proof of the origin of the recipe being authentic would make the cuisine itself authentic.

Jason: Where the recipe came from would describe authenticity for me.

{laughter} (Pre-departure)

Other participants' measure of authenticity for the food was based on the preparation of the food. Some of the participants wished to see the food being prepared. They thought that if they could see the food being prepared in a different way than what they are used to seeing, knowing that the food was not pre-packaged but that a special method was used, this would illustrate the authenticity of the cuisine.

Jake: If I see it made, like {laughter} I guess in a different way, I can tell it's not mass produced, like it is here at restaurants.

Interviewer: If you see food made in a different way in China, then it is authentic in your mind?

Jake: Sometimes...I don't know how I would know, but I know I would when I saw it. (Pre-departure)

This uncertainty displayed in Jake's reflection on his own definition of authenticity was evident with the majority of the participants. They did not appear to have a clear understanding of what authenticity was to them. This uncertainty diminished the longer the participants were in China, but in the pre-departure focus group it was evident how uncertain they are even when discussing the topic they brought up and cared about.

Some of the participants did not use the term authenticity, but they expressed what they thought authenticity would be like in comparison to what they had experienced in the United States. This comparison was most evident through cuisine. As the participants continued discussing authenticity of the cuisine, other opinions of authenticity arose.

One participant, Sara, emphasized her view that food is merely specific based on geography. She asserted that the food does not make a person or people group a certain way they just partake in specific types of food because of their location. This could be demonstrated through the example of people who live in Maine eating more lobster typically than people who live in Kansas. Maine, with its geographic location, is a perfect place to catch lobster. The state of Maine is known for their lobster, whereas Kansas is in

the middle of the continental United States and its geographic location does not make it ideal for catching lobster.

Sara: Food, although it's specific to different places does not mean that they are a certain way or they act this way because they have this food. I don't think it plays a role in how a person, or how they as a people are, but what food they have is really just based on where they live. Their food is definitely going to be different than Chinese food that they sell in the US.  
(Pre-departure)

While Sara's thought is accurate that some places are more adept for certain types of food than others, it still would point to the idea of origin. Recipes for lobster probably would not originate out of a place like Kansas as opposed to somewhere like Maine. So while she did not believe that people are a certain way based on their food, that food is merely based off location, this points directly to the other reference to authenticity that was raised in regard to origin.

Sara also pointed out that she knew the cuisine in China would be different than the American Chinese food she was used to in the United States. Another participant, Jason, seemed to also share this point of view. He stated that although he knows American Chinese food may not be realistic; he is fine with the difference and understands it does not have to be the same. He seems to think that since American Chinese food did not originate in America, it cannot be realistic. This argument would mean that if Chinese food comes from China then it is authentic.

Jason: I definitely like it [Chinese food], I know that a lot of the dishes, that are served in American Chinese locations are not the most realistic, as far

as what happens in China, which I'm okay with. I mean it doesn't have to be the same. You know they are just sort of inspired by the food in China.

(Pre-departure)

This discussion of the participants' understandings of authentic cuisine based off their own personal experience led to them using the terms "authenticity" and "authentic" to further expound on the topic they had begun. Due to the participants' lack of experience in China, they compared their perceptions to what they had experienced with other cultures. When trying to relate to American Chinese food versus Chinese food, the participants found that it was best to refer to experiences with other cultures they had.

Zach: You can try Mexican food over here and then go eat authentic and you're like you know, I get it. (Pre-departure)

...

Drew: There was a particular Chinese restaurant in Fort Worth where I grew up called Peony's. It was owned by Chinese people and I felt like it was probably closer to real Chinese food than most places where you go in America and I really liked it. (Pre-departure)

...

Investigator: So even if it's a Chinese representation of an American made food, it's still not authentic? Why?

Drew: To be authentic, it kinda has to originate somewhat from that culture, where KFC and McDonald's do not originate from the culture. Now they could produce something that I think is authentic but maybe it's based off

some kind of French cuisine that I have no prior knowledge to, but to me it would be authentic. (Pre-departure)

Once again, origin is a rather crucial concept to the participants in relation to authenticity. Drew even alludes to the idea of staged authenticity with his description of origin being important to authenticity. He highlighted that companies have the power to make consumers believe that certain things are authentic when they are not. This is known as staged authenticity, where a person believes they are experiencing something that is authentic but in reality it has been made to make the consumer believe it is authentic when in fact it is not. The participants' idea of origin would be able to break the staged authenticity barriers to a certain extent. With the participants' lack of personal experience, it appears that origin is crucial to them to help protect them from being tricked by staged authenticity.

Although many of the participants' views on what defines authentic cuisine seemed to relate back to the idea of origin, it was clear that all of the participants to some extent or the other had preconceived notions of glamorized, authentic Chinese cuisine. This was evident through their remarks about what they thought the cuisine would be like while in China.

Zach: It'll just be fresher and it'll just taste fresher. Yea. I think there's probably even menu items over in those places in China that we've never seen before, just because they have the time and the resources to make stuff that they wouldn't make over here in a McDonald's, where they're worried about getting everything out in thirty seconds, everything's frozen. (Pre-departure)

The concept of freshness arose among the participants, and many of them agreed that they thought the food would be fresher in China than it is in America. The reason behind this idea is that many of the participants seemed to view American food as pre-packaged and fast food. The American society is one that operates off of a mindset of ‘time is money’ and the people seem to always be striving to complete more work in less time. That is the mindset that the participants live in and are accustomed to. Many people are too busy with work, school, or other activities that they do not have time to make their own food, much less have their own garden. Instead, they hurry to drive-through chains and eat out at restaurants.

This freshness concept relates back to authenticity because the participants viewed the Chinese people as living a slower lifestyle. Similar to the slow food movement that is going on in countries like Italy, where individuals take time to prepare and eat a meal with friends. Some participants viewed authentic Chinese cuisine in this glamorized manner, where every person has enough time to eat and prepare nothing but fresh food.

Investigator: What do you think will make the food in China authentic? As opposed to inauthentic and how will you know? Do you think you will know?

Sara: Like real, authentic Chinese food, but like growing up I ate Mexican food that was home-cooked, so just comparing that I can say that there is a difference because one, it’s not like mass produced or dishing batches out over and over again, it’s like you actually stayed there and cooked this meal for you know, hours or whatever. (Pre-departure)

Most of the participants could directly relate to Sara's comment because they had enjoyed home-cooked Mexican food because of their ethnic background, had visited Mexico before or lived in a border state. What is interesting about her comment is that she is equating home-cooked food, that which is not mass-produced, with authenticity. This notion of someone spending hours in the kitchen cooking a family recipe that has been passed down for years is what the participants seemed to be referencing to as authenticity. Nowhere in her comment does she say the word 'fresh', which is what so many of the other participants referenced authentic Chinese cuisine to. But she does stress the fact that it is home-cooked and this seems to insinuate somewhat that the food would at least not be prepackaged. She also states that authentic is not mass-produced. The thought of someone making the same meal over and over again as in a restaurant setting, according to her, is inauthentic.

This comparison of home-cooked meals and mass-produced meals; with one being authentic and the other inauthentic, points toward relationships being the key. Sara's point is that the people stayed there [in the home] and cooked the meal for hours together. This also shows the person/people the meal was being cooked for that they are important enough for the time and energy that goes in to making the meal. Relationships and their connection to authenticity will be discussed later on in greater detail. The other participants, although they did not directly say the same thing, were all nodding in agreement when she was saying this, inferring they agreed with her.

Since the participants thought that authentic Chinese cuisine would originate in China, be fresh and homemade, for the most part, they all agreed that American companies such as KFC and McDonalds would not be considered authentic. Some of the

participants had varying opinions on the extent of authenticity that KFC and McDonald's in China would hold.

Drew: I mean they also will make KFC in China and McDonalds and I mean I wouldn't really consider that authentic Chinese food. Because it's an American food that's being reproduced in China. (Pre-departure)

...

Sara: [in regards to KFC and McDonalds] Partially inauthentic, just because it probably has different oils, I'm assuming they have some other kind of peanut oil or something. But just the differences in some of the stuff, like the breading would possibly be different. (Pre-departure)

...

Jason: Well, I'd have to look at what's on the menu, because I've heard that KFC in China is not very representative of the menu in the United States. It is sort of the same thing with this, if I went to, I don't know, a Mexican restaurant in the United States I would see it probably as Mexican American or if I went to a Chinese place, Chinese American. Obviously the food has its roots in a specific culture. It would be sort of like American Chinese, you know their Chinese American like our American Chinese. It would be a representation of the view of our food. (Pre-departure)

...

Zach: [Do you think the KFC and the McDonald's are the same in China?]  
No, it's different. (Pre-departure)

The participants' views and understanding of authenticity pre-departure were that the cuisine is important to authentic travel experience and that it is influenced by several factors. The participants had idealized views on authenticity in China, where the people only use the freshest of foods, all of the cuisines' origins were known and highlighted and that the food was cooked at home or in small localized establishments. These romanticized opinions of what authenticity in China would be like were in stark contrast to what the participants were used to experiencing in their everyday lives.

### **Post-trip Conceptualizations**

The post-trip focus group was conducted on Sunday, July 28, 2013. This was approximately a week after the participants had arrived home from their trip. Many of the participants had one perception of authenticity and as they experienced more and interacted with the people and the culture, their understanding of authenticity evolved into a radically different understanding once the trip was finished which they discussed in the focus group.

This outlook that the participants had after their trip was that authenticity was constructed through relationships that were built with the locals they met while they were in China. Through the relationships formed with these individuals, the participants were able to experience a backstage vantage point of the Chinese cuisine and culture. Their experiences through encounters and obtaining of first-hand information and that of stories from their new friends shaped based on these relationships they established, allowing them to experience authenticity.

In light of the participants' preconceived notions of what they thought authentic Chinese cuisine would be like, when the post-trip focus group was conducted, they all

agreed that they did not feel they experienced an authentic representation of all types of Chinese cuisine, because they were eating what they classified as “camp food.” Every day the participants would arrive at the cafeteria to eat meals. The room was large and spacious; it had four vertical windows on the walls. There were four stationary air conditioning units placed on the walls, there was a projector screen and an electric piano at the front of the room. In the back there was a long serving table. There were eight rows of cafeteria tables with attached seats filling the rest of the room.

Participants were recruited to serve food to the students during meal times. Tables would be called to the serving line where they would collect a metal tray and set of chopsticks. They would go through the serving line and then come to a self-serve area where a large metal bowl of soup and small metal bowls with a type of spoon was. There were no drinks served at meals and no napkins. While there were air conditioning units throughout the room, with the doors being constantly open it felt like a sauna in the cafeteria. This backdrop was not what the participants were expecting to experience when eating in China.

This camp food was not home-cooked or what they considered fresh and, therefore, did not meet the participants’ standards for what they considered authentic cuisine, displeasing many of them.

Zach: We didn’t get a full, fledged view of what Chinese food is because we weren’t out in the city; we were in a cafeteria, so we had the same kinds of foods. We didn’t get to taste what every day Chinese food is like. (Post-trip)

...

Jake: We didn't get the full Chinese food experience. (Post-trip)

...

Drew: Basically eating camp food, but we are in a really different location than where we were used to. (Post-trip)

Along with experiencing a cuisine that was not as fresh or home-cooked as the participants expected, they also agreed that the food, on the whole, was not as "different" as they were expecting it to be. Some of the participants thought some of the Chinese food was Americanized. This understanding of the Chinese food and how different it was or was not compared to American food was experienced by all of the participants to some extent.

Many of the more adventurous participants said that they wished the food had been unrecognizable to them in comparison to the food they were used to eating. Others, although they did not enjoy the cuisine, could see similarities in ingredients that they did not expect before they arrived. By relating similarities with the Chinese cuisine to the American cuisine participants were used to, this seemed to act as a coping method when trying to adjust to the culture shock while in China.

Drew: I would say overall, the Chinese food wasn't really as weird as I was expecting. (Post-trip)

...

Zach: I really was kind of surprised at how, Americanized a lot of things were. I also thought with the food like you know they did have a lot of Chinese dishes, but they even had things that just seemed more Americanized, like they tried to, like they tried to, for example they would have Pepsi for their

drinks at restaurants, They did things that I just didn't expect, like they wrapped tofu in bacon at one place we went. I just thought that was really strange and not something typical Chinese cuisine would have, just stuff like that. (Post-trip)

These comments go back to the participants' romanticized view of what they thought authentic Chinese cuisine would be like. They expected it to be fresh, home-cooked, and food that they had never seen or tasted before, so when they could recognize some of the ingredients and relate them to things they are used to eating on a daily basis, the glamour and shock factor was not there. This was disappointing for many participants, as one even noted his desire for the food to be different.

Jake: I wanted it to be more different I guess. (Post-trip)

Others not only related the food back to American food, but also the people and culture to American people and culture.

Drew: I think what was surprising to me was really the lack of differences.

You know to me, the cultural differences didn't seem quite as different as what I thought they would be and like I don't know if that's the globalization, just kind of everywhere is becoming the same anyway or if it just shows that people really aren't that different the world over once they are put in the same kind of economic status. (Post-trip)

These statements highlight that the participants, in hindsight, were wanting to experience things that were radically different than what they are used to experiencing on a day-to-day basis when they are at home in the states. Things being "different" was part of what the participants were saying would be authentic. This is interesting for them to

say, since before the trip none of the participants had been to China. All participants appeared to value authenticity, but during their post-trip focus group many of them were saying they wanted things to be more “different.” They were equating authenticity in part to things that they were not used to. This understanding of authenticity may have hindered certain participants from experiencing authenticity, because they may have perceived that something was not as “different” as they were expecting, and therefore not authentic. They wanted to experience novelty and to have their perceptions of authentic China, which included many cultural aspects being radically different from what they were used to in America, to fully experience it all and make the trip feel completed.

Whether the participants viewed the cuisine at the camp as inauthentic or authentic, the food did play a large role in the participants’ level of comfort throughout the trip. For most of the participants, not having something they were used to eating made them uncomfortable the majority of the time. For others, the differences and newness of the food made them feel more comfortable and part of the culture.

Jake: We had like KFC one of the last days and like my body was like yes I want this {laughter} that was within my comfort zone I guess. (Post-trip)

...

Sara: Food was a factor in being comfortable. I like to immerse myself in new environments...Really, the non-familiar foods did not faze me. I enjoy eating almost anything. Different foods though, did make me feel more comfortable. I do not like the feeling of someone trying to make or do something for someone that will make the other person feel like they are

being given less of an authentic atmosphere than they could be given.

(Post-trip)

...

Elizabeth: It would have been nice to have some sort of chips or something not Chinese food during the day, just to get me through it a little bit better.

(Post-trip)

As evident, in their own words, participants knew when they were and were not comfortable with the cuisine. They understood that having certain foods that they were used to eating and liked to eat made them more comfortable. They also understood that when they did not have those foods, it was more difficult for them to be comfortable because they were hungry and this affected their experience. Other participants who were more comfortable when they were experiencing unusual foods knew that this only enhanced their trip. It appeared that many of the participants were disappointed in the lack of “differences” at times, and at other times wanted more of what they were used to.

These post-trip attitudes are closely connected to the pre-departure mindsets the participants had (whether positive or negative). Those who exhibited a positive outlook on the front end of the trip seemed to be more open-minded throughout their time in China, and to have a more positive overall experience. Conversely, the opposite was true with the participants who had a more negative mindset before the trip. These topics are discussed later on and how they affected the participants’ understanding of authenticity.

Authenticity emerged as the most prominent theme of this study. It is connected to every other theme that emerged from the data. The first and most connected of the themes were that of relationships and culture.

**Relationships.**

One of the participants discussed how something might seem authentic to him when it actually was not if the origin was examined. This refers to the concept of staged authenticity. Staged authenticity is when something is created to seem authentic when it is not. While only one of the participants directly addressed this topic, the majority of the participants were concerned with the origin in regards to authenticity. This is where relationships came in with this study. Through relationships that the participants built with the Chinese people they came in contact with, they were able to get a behind-the-scenes look at life. This made their understanding of Chinese culture and life authentic.

Authenticity was closely tied with relationships and culture with the participants as observed during participant observation on the trip. An example of this was with Fanny, one of the translators. Fanny is a Chinese lady who has spent her life in China working with Chinese and Americans to help in the exchange of cultural education. She was very passionate about working with the participants and not only making them comfortable while they were in China, but also making sure they felt like China was a home to them by sharing her love for her home. The participants were able to get to know Fanny for several days and had experienced her hospitality and generosity on numerous accounts, most notably when she hosted a very special traditional tea ceremony only for the participants to be able to teach, share information, and let them experience it first-hand.

One night after the evening's activities had ended; Fanny invited the participants to be a part of a traditional Chinese tea ceremony in the camp's dining hall. Upon arrival, each participant was greeted with a gift of tea and invited to come to the head table and smell the tea leaves that were to be used. Fanny began by explaining how rare the leaves

the participants smelled were. She said that that type of tea would be worth \$3,200.00 per ounce because of the type of leaves used. She then explained in detail how tealeaves were grown and harvested.

She moved on to the actual ceremony after that. She began by washing the leaves and explaining the reason behind it. Although she was sitting at a cafeteria table, she looked regal, with her poised posture and precise holdings of the delicate tea set. The participants were encouraged to come up to the table and try the tea. She told a story of an emperor who served tea and how you were supposed to tap on the table three times to indicate gratitude. She performed three or four runs and then offered to teach participants how to conduct the ceremony. This time went on for over an hour and the participants were able to ask questions, taste and participate in the ceremony. This was a favorite experience of many of the participants.

The participants said they liked the gift, even if they didn't like tea because they felt that it was an authentic gift. They felt this was authentic because the tea was similar to the kind they had been served and because it was in Chinese packaging and that Fanny had bought it for all of them as a special gift to remind them of their stay in China. Everyone seemed to enjoy the ceremony [Field Note 10 July 2013]

This sense of authenticity was based on their relationship with Fanny and the fact that the participants did not have any other knowledge of Chinese teas, other than what Fanny had just told them. They had become close to her and knew her passion, so that when the traditional tea ceremony was held they felt comfortable with her and knew they could trust her. Combining the trust she had established with them and the knowledge

they had just obtained from her, the participants understood the tea to be authentic and treasured the gifts because of the story and meaning behind it. This allowed the participants to have a glimpse behind the scenes; they were not merely at a generic tea shop purchasing some tea they did not know anything about. Fanny may have been conducting the tea ceremony to push her own ideas or agenda, but she seemed very genuine in her actions and the participants seemed to feel the same way. They saw the gesture as their friend taking the time to show them the traditions behind the tea, share stories about the tea with them and give them a gift, taking them past the front stage to discover authenticity.

Many of the participants said that when the students offered them food they liked they felt like they were getting a better view of what life was like normally for their students. They seemed to feel this way because of the trust that had been established between them and the students. [Field Note 12 July 2013]

Another example of the relationships established was with the students. At the beginning of the week, some of the students would not even try to talk to the participants because they were so shy. After spending a week with the participants, they had established what many of them said were very close relationships with the students and many of the students were talking to the participants about almost every aspect of their lives.

I experienced this with some of my students as well. I had three girls in my class who seemed to be close to one another, they would keep to themselves and only speak to each other most of the time. I tried to get them to talk with me on the first day but it

seemed pointless as they did not seem too interested, even in discussing trivial things. Slowly as the week progressed and I kept trying, they began to open up, little by little.

On the third night, as we were walking back to the dormitories I made a comment asking if they had boyfriends. They all giggled and one of the girls, Susan, said “Of course not!” I laughed too, but told them that lots of girls their age in the United States had boyfriends. This was very interesting to them and they exploded into conversation trying to explain to me why they did not have boyfriends and all about what was and was not acceptable in their families. We spent about thirty minutes discussing some of their familial and friendship relationships, as well as what dating and marriage one day would look like. I was amazed that just three days before I could not even get these girls to talk with me about what types of food they enjoyed most and now they were sharing about their relationships openly. I was not the only person who experienced their students and translators opening up to them.

Many of the participants are sharing information that their students have been discussing with them. The tests, which determine the students’ futures, are things that are important but often feelings and emotions about them are downplayed. Some of the students have opened up about friends committing suicide or trying to commit suicide while others have talked about how they feel they have to perform to a certain level for their parents. Other students have shared about their personal lives, some about being bullied at school and others about relationships with members of the opposite sex. Many of the participants said they were not prepared for this amount of disclosure, but that it only made their relationships with the

students, although brief, seem that much stronger. [Field Note 11 July 2013]

This level of disclosure between the individuals established a trust, so that when the students wanted to share with the participants the gifts of food their parents had brought them, it made the experience seem more authentic.

Zach: I think that with as much time as we spent with the kids, we were able to build up trust with them, and with other people like Fanny and Gerald, Yamma, and so on. But especially with the kids, like throughout the week they would talk to us about what they were eating and we would ask them if we liked it or not and then would try it ourselves. So we kind of built a level of trust based off those experiences and becoming friends with them. We were sharing life together and this built meaningful trusting relationships. This trust made us feel more welcome and at home in China.  
(Post-trip)

This authenticity was based on the trusting relationship established that participants were using as a reference point when learning about China. The participants became more open to trying new things and listening to personal experiences. The participants were being told about aspects of their students' lives, but through trying the food that the students' parents had brought, they were experiencing the everyday part of life, the backstage, with their students. This experience was authentic to the majority of the participants. These relationships established with the students made their stories of their lives and things they shared that they enjoyed and knew about China to come to life in a very real and personal manner.

By the end of the week, the students, translators and participants were all very close to one another. The use of teamwork in all of the weekly activities had contributed to this and when the creative projects were presented, parents, family members and friends of the students as well as the rest of the camp participants were able to see the fruit of the classes' teamwork. After each class presented their creative project, the participants were given the microphone and an opportunity to praise each student individually for their hard work throughout the week and give them a certificate of achievement.

The emotions of love and friendship were very evident during this time, where every child was praised individually in front of their friends and family. This was a big deal for the students because in China, a great deal of emphasis is placed on "face" and how others perceive you. These expressions of pride from the participants to their students seemed to form an instant bond with the students' parents who wanted pictures with the participants and to be around them, although many of them could not speak English.

Some of the teachers were even given gifts from their students and they said they treasured these gifts more than anything that they could pick out for themselves because of the meaning the students had put into picking it out and many of the gifts had symbolism associated with the Chinese culture.

[Field Note 12 July 2013]

Relationships were closely connected with authenticity and culture experienced by the participants. The closer the participants became to their teammates, students and translators, the more open and trusting they became. This, in turn, exposed the

participants to circumstances and experiences that had they not had a relationship with these people, they might not have experienced. As the relationships were being established, the participants seemed to be testing the waters with how much trust to give the people they were building relationships with. As more time elapsed and participants saw that their friends had their best interest at heart and merely wanted to share with the participants what they knew, the participants became more open and welcoming to experiences. These relationships and their impact was evident throughout the participants' comments in the post-trip focus group.

An example of this is the relationship that was built with Fanny, who was the director of the camp and one of the translators. At the beginning of the week, none of the participants knew Fanny, even almost standoffish towards her because she was very strict with the disciplinary actions of the students. As time passed, many of the participants got to know Fanny better and shared about their lives as well as experienced her help with disciplining their students. This built up a certain level of trust that was only increased when mid-week she invited all of the participants to a traditional tea ceremony and taught them about tea and the art of the ceremony as well as gave them each a gift. By the end of the trip, all of the participants knew Fanny fairly well and seemed to trust her as a friend.

Zach: I think Fanny had in our best interest to take us to somewhere that we would at least like some of the food I really think that she wouldn't have taken us somewhere that she thought we just wouldn't like it. It was just that that seemed like they really cared about us being comfortable, even Gerald too, he wanted us to go somewhere we wouldn't hate. So I think

that helped me try some more things at that restaurant. Because I felt like she had my best interest at heart. (Post-trip)

...

Jason: [Did you trust your host/translator's choices and recommendations in food?] I think I found it comforting... So I really doubt that she would have picked some place with outlandish stuff. (Post-trip)

...

Sara: I did trust my translator and host's advice on food because they knew certain things Americans would not like. (Post-trip)

This sentiment was expressed by all of the participants. They felt close to their translators, especially to Fanny and Gerald, and therefore those two people in particular influenced the participants' views on authenticity. This influenced their perceptions and understanding of authenticity because the things that Gerald and Fanny exposed them to in regards to the Chinese culture, food and people, were what the participants used as a base for their understanding of authenticity within China.

When the typhoon came through and the participants were forced to evacuate, Gerald was so kind as to take all but two of the participants to his home until they could leave for the United States. During this time, Gerald opened up his home completely to the participants and helped make them as comfortable as possible. His wife and two daughters were in Korea and had been for several weeks and Gerald repeatedly apologized for the state his home (apartment) would be in because of their absence. He said hello to his doorman and then walked with a trail of Americans behind him to the

elevator. There was no air conditioning in the lobby or elevators, but all ten people managed to squeeze onto the single elevator with their baggage.

As everyone was cramming into the elevator, Gerald asked a joke to cut the tension in the air. “How many Chinese people can fit on an elevator?” All of the participants just looked at him as the elevator began the climb to the sixteenth floor. He answered his own joke, “Always one more!” He burst into laughter and it was contagious as everyone on the elevator laughed. It was after one in the morning and everyone was tired and tense with the oncoming storm.

Once the doors opened, it was a task for everyone to climb out of the elevator. We then proceeded one by one down a short narrow hallway, which was also lacking air-conditioning. Sweat was pouring off everyone’s foreheads as Gerald opened the door to his home. It seemed to take forever for each person to take off their shoes right inside the door and to get their luggage inside. Immediately after entering the apartment, there was a bathroom on your right and the dining area on your left. The dining area was open and connecting to the living room. On the right side of the living room was a door which led to the master bathroom, bedroom and balcony. Off the left side of the living room was the kitchen, guest bedroom and his daughters’ bedroom. There was also a balcony that connected to the living room and had a lovely view of the city. The apartment was small by American standards, but large and very luxurious for being in China.

As soon as everyone was crammed into the house, Gerald helped further his relationship with each of the participants by seeing their needs of being scared and far from home and trying to help them feel more comfortable through his hospitality.

Upon our arrival and showing us to our rooms he whipped out some ice bags.

Ice was the one that all of the participants complained about at some point or another because it just didn't exist for us while we were in China. This may seem like a trivial thing but it was a record heat while we were there and it was very much so missed by all the participants. He pulled out the ice bags and gave all of us lots of ice and cold water from his refrigerator. Then he informed us that his family had just received a care package from the US from some friends and that in the morning we were more than welcome to the honey nut cheerios they had received. He said he would go get some fresh milk in the morning and that he had Vietnamese coffee and strawberry jam.

That next morning, it was a completely different attitude among the travelers as they ate their American breakfast. Gerald took us all to the store and told us to purchase whatever we needed to cook whatever American meal we wanted that night at the apartment. Everyone decide to have pasta and mashed potatoes. Everyone also enjoyed watching Gerald's little girl's collection of Disney movies while they waited out the typhoon. [Field Note 14 July 2013]

At this point of the trip, the participants were scared of the coming typhoon and disappointed because they were not going to be able to go to Beijing like they had planned. Gerald not only welcomed them into his home, but he also tried to make them as comfortable as possible by giving them access to things that would remind them of home. A closer examination of these items points to things that were authentically American to

the American participants. These items would include: cheerios, toast, coffee, jam, meat, potatoes, pasta and Disney movies.

It is interesting because the participants defined authentic food in their pre-departure focus group as fresh, not pre-packaged, prepared at home and culturally rooted. The meat, potatoes and pasta would fall into all of those categories. The only thing is that to the participants it was culturally rooted in their own culture, not the Chinese culture. The Cheerios, toast, jam and coffee would all not be considered authentic based upon the participants' definition of authentic food before they left for China. But all of those items seemed to greatly comfort them in their time of distress. Despite all that was going on, Gerald seemed to know exactly what would help the participants feel at ease, right down to the media to give them to watch.

Due to the level of trust and friendship that had been established between the participants and their translators, whenever Fanny or Gerald would take the participants somewhere or tell them something, all of the participants felt a sense of safety and comfort, regardless of how new and different the experience was for them. These feelings of safety, comfort and trust were imperative for the participants of this trip for them to be able to experience authenticity.

Not only were the translators and students relationships important to the participants, but their teammates also affected each other. The teammates had a certain weight in affecting each person's view of what to try and not try with the cuisine.

Jason: I didn't try most of the soups because, my partner Mark told me how last year he swallowed some soup and had a fishbone stuck in his throat and I was like you know... {laughter} (Post-trip)

...

Drew: Jason and Jake, Jake just went for it {laughter} and Jason tried everything.

Then it was nice to have other test things before we did. But I normally still tried stuff. (Post-trip)

These teammate relationships were influential to the overall experience and outcome of the trip. It is interesting that relationships between the participants and the Chinese translators and students formed much quicker than the relationships of the participants and their fellow American teammates. This was felt by many of the participants and observed by Gerald in the debriefing of the trip. The Chinese people were very warm and welcoming to all of the participants and it is because of this and the quick but solid relationships that were formed that participants were more open to fulfilling experiencing the culture and cuisine while on the trip.

Jake: The people there want to get to know you on a much more personal level. Which was nice I feel like in America it's just like very surface level and so I really liked that. (Post-trip)

This personal level of friendship opened up other opportunities for participants to get an insider view on life in China. These relationships helped the participants to see a backstage version of authenticity and not have to worry about front stages, because they were able to trust the people they met and built community and relationships with. These relationships greatly influenced the participants' understanding of an authentic travel experience.

### **Personal Experiences.**

Authenticity was experienced with Chinese culture through relationship building and personal experiences. The participants were more open and willing to experience the culture and felt it was authentic when it was shown or presented to them by someone they had a trusting relationship with. Much of the personal experiences throughout the participants' stay in China was through the cuisine. Food was a large part of the cultural experience and many of the participants were worried about it before the trip as evident in the pre-departure focus group.

Jason: I think it will have a pretty big impact; I am of the belief that life happens when you are eating food with people that you like. (Pre-departure)

...

Drew: And even what goes on around the food, like sharing a meal with them. I think we would miss out on a big part of that culture if we don't participate with that. I mean I guess you could go there and sit down while everybody else is eating but you'd probably miss out on a lot of the conversation. (Pre-departure)

...

Jake: Eating is kind of a cultural experience. (Pre-departure)

...

Zach: Food's just such a big part of your daily life anywhere. If you don't eat you, or at least I do, I have a terrible day. So like I don't know, it's just food is one of the huge defining factors of all countries. I mean all

countries are known for their food in some way or another, whether good or bad. So it is such an integral part, is what I am trying to say. (Pre-departure)

This was the sentiment and feelings of the participants before they left for their trip to China. The participants were very aware of issues like authenticity, Americanization of productions and how food plays and intricate role in individuals' lives. Many of the participants agreed with the above sentiment. They felt that the food they were going to eat in China was important. The participants thought this for various reasons, some thought it was because it would be a bridge to relate to the students, others a means for better understanding the culture, but all agreed that it would impact their overall personal experiences.

After the trip, in the post-trip focus group, participants discussed how the cuisine affected aspects of the trip. It was interesting that they discovered through conversation how their personal experiences were closely tied to the relationships they had made.

Zach: I did feel more like a part of their culture and I did like talking about their food with them and hearing from them if they like it or what's their favorite foods to eat and stuff and so it was definitely uniting and a great way to converse and stuff during meal time talking about their food and me trying it. (Post-trip)

By the participants eating with their students, they were able to share in the food that the students found normal and learn about them and their lives; even if the questions started off as simply as "What is this?" or "Do you like this?" Questions like these were

stepping stones in building a relationship and the participants learning about Chinese culture through their students and translators while sharing about their own culture.

These personal experiences were closely tied with the participants' understanding of authenticity. In the beginning, before the trip, the participants had no idea what Chinese culture would look like. Through their interactions with their students and the relationships that they were able to build with them, the participants were able to experience elements of Chinese culture they may not have been able to see if it were not for those relationships. Their knowledge of the Chinese culture was expanded through the individuals they met, who allowed them to see into their daily lives, which led the participants' to experience the backstage and authentic culture.

This desire for authenticity within their personal experiences seems to stem from the participants' longing to know more about China's past and what is outside of them. Some of the participants might not have been too adventurous with their cuisine choices, but the majority of the participants seemed intrigued about the Chinese culture, and were eager to learn more.

Investigator: How did your perceptions of China compare to your actual experience?

Jason: Chinese culture wouldn't be that apparent until you were on the inside looking at it. You know all the stuff relating to face and family pressures and stuff.

I did notice a few things here and there with the kids like they find silly things amusing but they can't do it themselves. Like it is a physical struggle...

(Post-trip)

...

Elizabeth: I think that I wasn't necessarily surprised but it was a big thing that stuck with me how hard the kids would work on like our projects just to impress us and their parents and how they would like work on their speeches and stuff in their breaks and they just really wanted it to be absolutely perfect and they just like stressed out about it and that was kind of not a shock to me but like it was something that stuck with me just how much they you know wanted to work hard and be the best and I guess that's just comes with their culture. (Post-trip)

These statements by the participants reiterate the importance of the relationships established with the Chinese people while on the trip and the backstage experience that came with those relationships. As Jason said, certain aspects of the Chinese culture would not be visible unless a person was on the inside (backstage). The participants felt they were able to experience that and have an authentic travel experience because of it. Elizabeth also noted something similar about the Chinese students, but was only able to notice that through her personal interactions with them. She spent all week in the classroom working with the students on their projects and building relationships while teaching about her culture and learning about theirs.

Personal experiences were another means through which the participants' understanding of authenticity and authentic travel experience were shaped. Knowledge of the Chinese culture and the desire to learn more about it was encouraged through the relationships that were being built throughout the trip.

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this study, participants had the aforementioned understanding of authenticity before their trip to China. These perceptions were based on a lack of personal experience with China and the Chinese culture. All of the information that they had was obtained from secondhand sources being people they knew who had been to China or knew about the culture. The participants' view before their trip of authenticity in China was one where life in China would be slower and more idyllic than their everyday American lifestyles, which are full of hustle and bustle. The food would be fresh, culturally rooted, home-cooked, not mass-produced and true to its origin.

Based off their post-trip focus group, the participants' understanding of authenticity had evolved and developed to a different outlook. The participants' new view of authenticity was constructed through relationships established during their stay. Through these relationships, participants were exposed to cultural and personal experiences that became their reference point of authenticity. The trust established from these relationships and the personal insight and stories allowed the participants to experience normal, everyday life encounters which their Chinese friends, which they defined as authentic.

The participants' view of authenticity was that authentic travel experiences are preferred and can be experienced. Food is a crucial part of an authentic travel experience. Authentic food experiences were those where the participants saw the use of fresh ingredients, traditions, originality, cooked in small quantities by everyday individuals who were not working for a corporate organization and that the participant had a relationship with. These authentic travel experiences that the participants felt were

experienced through the relationships they built with the Chinese people they met and came in contact with.

The pre-departure and post-trip conceptualizations of authenticity among the participants are different, but also similar at the same time. When looking for a backstage experience with cuisine that you find through having a relationship with someone on the inside, oftentimes that food will be fresh, traditional, local, and home-cooked. So while the participants' understanding of authenticity evolved throughout the course of their trip, their beginning outlook on authenticity can be intertwined with their final opinions on authenticity.

The above two themes of relationships and personal experiences emerged from the data and were explored in great detail as to how they related to the participants and their understanding of authenticity. The most important relationship between the themes was how they help answer the question of what role does food play in a participant's construction of an authentic travel experience in China? They point to the relationships established during the trip, leading the participants toward personally experiencing Chinese cuisine and culture. Therefore, the relationships built with locals who allowed participants to experience a backstage open up the door for the participant to engage in personal experiences with the culture and cuisine and that they play a crucial role in a participant's construction of an authentic travel experience in China.

## **CHAPTER V: INTERPRETATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The main purpose of this thesis was to analyze and recognize how first time travelers' perceptions of authenticity based off the local cuisine and encounters with staged authenticity affect their overall perception of the experience itself. The research question for this study was: What role does food play in participants' construction of an authentic travel experience during their first trip to China?

Authenticity was important in this study with the participants. Existential authenticity that which focuses on a state of being and not a certain thing or object (Wang, 1999) was examined among the participants. Many of the participants experienced existential authenticity through their travel to China by making relationships with people they met while they were there. Those relationships opened up the doors for the participants to be exposed to a behind-the-scenes and personal look at food and culture, which overall greatly impacted their authentic travel experience while in China.

I begin this chapter by interpreting the understandings the participants had of authenticity pre-departure and post-trip and using Ritzers' Something-Nothing continuum (2007) which stemmed out of his idea of the McDonaldization of society (2008). In the second half of the chapter, I apply MacCannell's (1973) theory of staged authenticity to better understand the manner in which relationships contributed to the participants' post-trip conceptualization of authenticity. After the first two sections, the limitations of the study are discussed. Finally, the chapter comes to a close with concluding remarks and recommendations for future studies.

### **Something-Nothing**

Participants of this study described authenticity in their pre-departure focus group as fresh, traditional, local, home-cooked, non-corporate, culturally rooted, and true to its origin. Their post-trip view of authenticity was that authenticity was constructed through relationships. These relationships opened up opportunities for the participants to be exposed to cultural and personal experiences of the people they had relationships with. Those experiences then became their reference point for authenticity.

The participants' views of pre-and post-trip authenticity are different in some ways and similar in others. Some aspects were different due to the fact that before the trip, the participants' understanding of authenticity was scattered and drawn from stereotypical ideas they had developed on what authenticity would look like.

As the trip went on, the participants discovered that while some of their perceptions of authenticity could be accurate, such as culturally rooted and fresh, other traits that they had believed determined authenticity such as non-corporate and home-cooked were not always underlying characteristics of authenticity. The participants' understandings pre- and post-trip were similar in that they discovered through relationships they were able to have a backstage view of life and experience authenticity which was often fresh, traditional, local, home-cooked, non-corporate, culturally rooted and true to its origin. Those factors were not necessary to make their experiences authentic, however, but the relationship and backstage viewpoint was.

On closer examination, the reasons behind these views become more apparent. The participants' behaviors refer back to George Ritzer's theory of the something-nothing continuum (2007), discussed in the literature review. In this theory, something is

described as being originally conceived and controlled by individuals and exhibiting unique substance and materials. Whereas nothing, is described as being centrally created and controlled as well as not exhibiting very unique substance and materials (Ritzer, 2007).

In the case of this study, the participants wanted to escape from nothing in the form of food, which they perceived to be generic, mass-produced items and experiences. As reflected in their descriptions of food in the United States, participants felt they were experiencing nothing in their everyday lives and hoped to discover something in China through authentic travel. This need to escape from nothing to something was vocalized throughout the transcript of the pre-departure focus group.

Jason: Yes I kind of just wanted to see China too. It's a very very different place than anywhere I've ever been. I mentioned those other places that I have been but those were western civilizations or purely tropical paradise and I think neither of those really touch this one and it's atmosphere. I think it will be totally different. I wanted to be exposed to something vastly different than anything I have ever been exposed to before.

...

Sara: I mean, it's cool, like oh cool, I get to go to China. To get to see new places.

...

Zach: This will be the biggest traveling experience I've ever had. The farthest away from home, so I will be completely out of my comfort zone in that realm. So it will be, I feel like I will be soaking up every opportunity to

see different things and to learn about different people and the way they do life. I'm so used to seeing the way Americans do life, but I'm not used to at all how those people do life so it will be very interesting to see that.

Here, the participants' comments do not directly refer to something and nothing, but they describe the participants' desire to experience places and things that are radically different than what they are used to. Their daily lives would fall into the category of nothing, because they would be described as not exhibiting anything unique and are centrally controlled and created. Their view of China, in these statements from the pre-departure focus group, demonstrates that the participants believe China is going to be something, because it will be different and unique.

Their pre-departure description of authenticity and what the participants were looking for through their travel matches Ritzer's breakdown of the something-nothing continuum and four of its subcontinua. Those subcontinua are unique-generic, local geographic ties-lack of local geographic ties, humanized-dehumanized, and enchanted-disenchanted (Ritzer, 2007).

The first of the subcontinua is unique-generic. The participants made it evident that they were searching for unique while describing the importance of home-cooked food over a mass-produced product. In the United States, people eat pre-packed or mass-produced food quite often. The numbers have greatly increased from 1971 when Americans spent \$6 billion on fast food to in 2001 where Americans spent \$110 billion (Schlosser, 2002). The participants did not think this would be the case in China and believed meals would be fresh and home-cooked. The participants were seeking out their idea of fresh and home-cooked food because it was the opposite of what they were used

to and so it was appealing to them. It would have been unique to them to have fresh, home-cooked food as opposed to their generic food they were used to.

The second subcontinua was local geographic ties-lack of local geographic ties, which the participants were also looking for. They stated that authenticity would be local, culturally rooted and true to its origin. The participants asserted that America is a melting pot; many things that we have in this country or participate in are ideas people have taken from other countries and changed them so they could label them “American.” It was voiced through the transcript and participants all agreed that to label something as American is contradictory since many things are borrowed from other cultures.

Jason: I think rather than saying it is distinctly American, I don't think...is there anything that is distinctly American? Versus um strictly the Chinese. Since the United States is such a young nation as a whole, it doesn't have these deep roots of food heritage. So pretty much everything we eat in the United States is for the most part, is a branch off of something else.

The participants wanted to experience things in China that had local geographic ties, as opposed to what they were used to which had a lack of local geographic ties. The participants' understanding of authenticity during their pre-departure focus group demonstrated the importance of local geographic ties, with local being one of their defining factors in authenticity. Local food that was true to its origin was important to the participants, displaying their desire to experience things that had local geographic ties to where they were going.

The third subcontinua was humanized-dehumanized, this was one of the most important aspects of the trip for the participants, as displayed in their description of

authenticity post-trip. Ritzer (2008) describes this subcontinua as, “that which is something tends to be associated with deep and highly meaningful human relationships, while nothing is linked to the relative absence of such human relationships: to dehumanize relationships” (p. 32). The participants felt that having a relationship with the people who cook their food or whom they are sharing the food with was important. They demonstrated this through their description of the nature of authenticity when using the words “home-cooked” and “non-corporate.” The importance of humanized versus dehumanized was fully realized and experienced by the participants throughout their trip and in hindsight when they asserted that relationships were a key factor to authenticity.

As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the participants stated how the relationships he made while in China seemed to be more intentional, and that the people were more open to building meaningful relationships. Without these relationships, the participants would not have been able to experience the backstage approach to food and culture while in China. These experiences greatly affected the participants’ perception of authenticity.

Another factor that influenced this perception was when the participants went out to the restaurant, had the take-out food, and tried the food at the closing ceremonies. The people who showed them these foods had relationships with the participants and had built up trust. The cooks who prepared the food at the camp for the participants did not have a relationship with any of them and they could not speak English, so no dialogue was exchanged between them. This made the food at the camp less trustworthy and in turn the participants viewed it as a staged front region. Relationships that were built with locals while the participants were in China are what helped shape their understanding of

authenticity the most. This subcontinua was one of the most important ones for the participants while they were on their trip.

The final subcontinua is that of enchanted-disenchanted. By enchanted, Ritzer meant that an experience was magical to a person, such as when various unrelated foods are chopped, cooked, and combined into a delicious complex dish. This would be what he would label as enchanting as opposed to disenchanting which would be food where there was no wonder or mystery left with it such as prepackaged foods (Ritzer, 2007).

When traveling, it is an enchanting or magical feeling to go to a place you have never been before and to experience things you have never experienced. This is what happened with many of the participants on their trip to China. They traveled all the way to the other side of the world and were able to experience things they never had before. They were able to step outside of what they were used to with their everyday lives and to try, see, and be in a place like none other they had ever seen. This type of experience tends to be magical for many people. Taking in sights, sounds and smells that they had never experienced before was the enchanting part of the trip. While in China, the smells of the foods were smells that the participants had never experienced before. They were unique and strange to the Americans, as were the sights and sounds as they saw foods they had never seen or heard of before, and watched food be cooked in ways they had never experienced before. This was enchanting because the experiences were new and unlike anything the participants have ever been a part of. There was mystery and magic to it, the experiences were new and exciting.

The disenchanting part of their trip was when the participants realized that things they were used to in America, such as fast food chains like KFC and McDonalds, were in

China as well. The excitement and enchantment the participants had been experiencing through all the new things they were being a part of was starkly contrasted with coming across places the participants were well-acquainted with. Their perception that everything would be local, fresh, home-cooked and non-corporate in China was dispelled by the realization that Chinese people eat KFC and McDonalds just like many Americans. Although they knew the food would not be exactly the same as the food in America, they still saw that the idea of McDonaldization was not just specific to America. Thankfully, through the relationships established with the locals they met, they were able to experience backstage authenticity, which brought back the enchanted aspect of China.

### **Staged Authenticity**

The concept of backstage and front stages with authenticity is one that Dean MacCannell (1973) wrote about with his theory of staged authenticity. He asserted that staged authenticity is relevant because travelers experience staged front regions when traveling, even when they are looking for back regions. A front region is described as an area created to be perceived as an authentic cultural space, but has actually been staged for tourists. These front regions are contrasting to back regions, which are areas where local people work and live. If a traveler seeks to find an authentic back region and all they can find is inauthentic front regions, they might feel dissatisfied with their experience (MacCannell, 1973).

The participants of this study found ‘real’ back stages through relationships with the local people they met and befriended in China. They knew this through the trust and rapport they established with these locals. Those relationships that the participants established with locals while they were in China gave them a chance to experience

authenticity through the cuisine and culture. This was possible because these relationships allowed the participants to experience a backstage during their travels. Two examples of this were when the participants were able to visit some of the historical and favorite places of their new friends, or to try some of the locals' favorite foods. These backstage, personal environments were pivotal in the construction of the participants' views of authenticity. The participants were skeptical and unable to fully experience what they perceived to be authenticity until they built relationships and trust with the Chinese people they came in contact with.

Many of the participants in the pre-departure focus group stated that things would be different in China as opposed to America, but they were not certain how things would be different. They wanted to experience authenticity in their trip to China, but they had little information about what to expect on their trip. This uncertainty is a key element of MacCannell's staged authenticity, where travelers are uncertain of whether they are experiencing a front or back region (1973). The participants set out looking for authenticity while in China without knowing just what they were looking for. After the trip, many felt as if they had discovered authenticity through back regions they experienced in their relationships with the Chinese people they met.

Zach: I think that with as much time as we spent with the kids, we were able to build up trust with them, and with other people like Fanny and Gerald, Yamma, and so on. But especially with the kids, like throughout the week they would talk to us about what they were eating and we would ask them if we liked it or not and then would try it ourselves. So we kind of built a level of trust based off those experiences and becoming friends with them.

We were sharing life with them and this built meaningful trusting relationships. This trust made us feel more welcome and at home in China.

...

Jake: Something that I really liked was the people there want to get to know you on a much more personal level. Which was nice I feel like in America it's just like very surface level and so I really liked that.

...

Zach: It was just that that seemed like they really cared about us being comfortable, even Gerald too... I felt like she [Fanny] had my best interest at heart.

Through these relationships, the participants established trust and felt that they were able to see a back region of authenticity through being a part of their Chinese friends' lives. They did not use the term back region or back stage, but did discuss sharing life with them, indicating that they were able to experience everyday life with their new friends and see what they live like on a daily basis. The participants also mentioned that the people they met wanted to get to know them on a more personal level, which indicated that they felt a level of trust and that they were being exposed to a back region of the locals' lives.

Other participants felt that while they experienced some back regions of authenticity through their new friends; they thought that the camp at which they were staying was a type of front region and staged authenticity. They felt this way because the cuisine was repetitive and equated to "camp food" in the United States. The participants also compared the food they ate at the camp to the food that their friends exposed them to

at the closing ceremonies and when they ate in town at the restaurant. The foods were completely different, making the comparison greater and the participants confirm their feelings of a staged front region.

Whereas, the places the participants' friends took them or shared with them, seemed to be back stages because of the trust that had been built and established. These experiences were unique compared to the experiences that were more generic at the camp. At the camp, the food was produced on a larger scale to accommodate so many people. Also, the cooks did not speak English and had no interaction with the participants, and the Chinese students did not even seem to enjoy or be used to all of the food that was prepared. These three reasons could have contributed to the participants feeling that the camp food was inauthentic. The camp food was more generic and less enchanting than the food that the participants' friends showed them.

An example is when Gerald took the participants to the grocery store and they were able to smell and see things that would never see in an American grocery store, or when Gerald ordered them take-out from his favorite place. It made the experience personal for them. That was his favorite little place, he ordered all of the food, and then it was consumed on the floor of his apartment. He told his guests about the food and its origin which made that single experience incorporate all four discussed something aspects of the something-nothing continua - unique, local geographic ties, humanized, and enchanted (Ritzer, 2007).

These examples demonstrate how important relationships are in the construction of authentic travel with participants. The participants desired to experience authenticity through their travels, as they were looking for something instead of nothing (Ritzer,

2007). They achieved that through bypassing staged front regions and experiencing backstage areas that they were exposed to through their relationships with the locals they met while in China. They were able to escape from their everyday lives in search of authenticity (MacCannell, 1976) and in this case, the participants found what they were looking for toward the end of their trip. They were able to discover authenticity through the relationships that were established while on their trip.

### **Limitations**

This study did have some limitations that are important to recognize. The selection of the participants was purposefully sampled in hopes of obtaining rich data, which might have been a limitation with the data obtained. There was a limited time frame for the study that may have inhibited the thoroughness and duration that could have been spent examining research and analyzing data. Also, data was not collected from Chinese participants; data was only collected from the American participants. This, too, might have given this study a biased slant. The size of the participants was also a limitation to the study. By not conducting one-on-one interviews with participants, some data might have been lost inside the focus groups.

Finally, the natural weather disaster of the typhoon altered the design of the trip, the participants could not travel to Beijing to visit iconic sites such as the Great Wall. While many may see this as a large limitation, I found that while this setback did change the layout of the overall trip, it allowed the participants to be able to go into their hosts' homes and opened a door to a back region of authenticity. I feel that the participants were able to increase their relationships with the locals they had met even more by being

invited into their homes and fed by them. So while this was a limitation in a sense, it also contributed to helping the participants explore a backstage of authenticity.

### **Conclusions**

The participants of this study evolved from individuals who knew authenticity was important, but were not quite sure what exactly authenticity in China would look like, into individuals who made meaningful relationships through their travels and because of those relationships were able to experience authenticity in China.

The participants' initial perception of authenticity was ethnocentric and stereotypical. They believed that life in China would be more rural and primitive. Time was thought to have moved slowly in China, where everyone cooked all of their food at home with only the freshest ingredients to make recipes of ancient generations. Americans are also struggling with the concept of authenticity and how it should promote certain types of foods and healthy eating behaviors.

This perception of authenticity can be harmful because it is not accurate to everyday life. Yes, there are fresh ingredients, there are local and traditional ways, and people do cook at home sometimes. But China is similar to the United States. There are many people who have various eating habits. While some people eat at home always and use special recipes, others may eat out daily at places like McDonalds or KFC. When individuals allow themselves to blindly believe in stereotypes, they walk a dangerous path and can fall victim to believing in false information. This attempt, to grasp at whatever knowledge they can, is a means through which the participants were attempting to construct an authentic experience for themselves.

Once the participants traveled to China they were able to see that life was not exactly as they had expected it to be. Many of them were surprised at the lack of differences between the Chinese and American people. They were able to see many similarities between the cultures. Some of the participants did not like the lack of differences exhibited between the two countries.

Jake - But I wanted it to be more different I guess than like what I am used to.

...

Elizabeth - I think if we had eaten like that all week, we would have a lot more stories about the food.

The participants were trying to shape the experience they had through what they knew. Before they left, they had constructed their perception of what the trip would be like based off of their limited preconceived notions. Once they were on the trip and they realized that their ideas were not factual to everyday life in China, there was almost a level of dissatisfaction. They were trying to shape the experience they had through stories of different experiences than what they were used to with their everyday lives.

This idea relates back to Veblen's (1899) theory of the leisure class, where leisure becomes more about the stories that are told to others and what can be shown to others in an attempt to set one apart, rather than about the leisure itself. Many people are more focused on telling others of their travels and how exotic and unique they were, and let that become the priority instead of being immersed in their travel for the simple enjoyment of being a part of it. Another related theory is Urry's (2002) tourist gaze. Urry explained that individuals see images of others or hear of others' experiences and when they go out themselves, they want to recreate those experiences to feel like they have

truly experienced the place they are visiting. Both of these theories help explain why the participants of this study sought to construct authenticity through their experiences.

One of the ways they were able to do this was the participants opened themselves up to relationships with the local people they met and they were able to see a little deeper than surface level in regards to the peoples' everyday lives. Through these experiences, the participants' understanding of authenticity changed. They were able to discover that while local, fresh, home-cooked, non-corporate, true to its origin, and traditional may all be facets of authenticity, something does not have to exhibit all of those characteristics to be authentic. Through these relationships, participants were able to step outside of their comfort zone and gain a knowledge and understanding that challenged and was bigger than their preconceived notions.

The implications of this study are imperative to educational travel programs because many of the participants in these programs are traveling for various reasons, but all of them will go into their travels with their own set of preconceived notions and ideas, trying to construct their own experience. By opening their minds and meeting people who are similar and different than them, future travelers will be challenged to learn and grow in a way they never have before. Through those relationships with local individuals, the participants will have a chance at experiencing back regions and authenticity through their travels.

I would recommend for university study abroad programs to invest the time and money toward pre-departure and post-trip gatherings where the participants will be able to meet with and start to form a relationship with the individuals they will be traveling with. Not only should they be able to meet and start forming a relationship with their

traveling companions, but they should also be able to speak with at least one person who has been where they are going and can offer some suggestions for them. This may help set the participants' minds at ease and allow them to be more open minded with their travels.

By having a gathering after the trip has concluded, maybe a few weeks after they return, the participants will be able to have a debriefing. These before and after trip meetings are important because it will help the participants process what they are about to learn or have learned and to hopefully be able to take the most they can away from their overall experience.

In future studies, researching the influence of relationships in the construction of authentic travel experiences would be important. It would also be interesting to study the influence of positive relationships versus negative relationships in participants' construction of authenticity.

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## **APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Pre-Departure Questions.

1. Tell me about your travel experience.
  - a. Why are you going on this trip?
  - b. Are you going because of World Vision's desire to help educate and reach out to the Chinese people?
  - c. What other reasons aside from World Vision's mission in this trip do you have in going?
2. What sort of exposure have you had to Chinese culture
  - a. What role will eating Chinese food play in understanding Chinese culture?
  - b. Could you not eat Chinese food and understand the culture well?
  - c. What are your perceptions of Chinese food?
1. What sort of exposure have you had to Chinese food?
  - a. How do you think Chinese food will compare in the States to Chinese food in China.
  - b. Did your perception of the food influence your decision to come on this trip?
  - c. Does your current perception of the food influence your attitude about how the trip will be?
4. Would you be more willing to try new food if a friend was to recommend it to you as opposed to a person you just met?

- a. Would you say you are more adventurous with food than your friends?
  - b. What makes food in China authentic and food in the states inauthentic?
  - c. If a Chinese person took you to eat KFC in China would that be inauthentic?
5. Do you plan on taking food with you?
- a. What is it about your perception of Chinese food that makes you want to bring your own food or makes you feel like you do not need to bring your own food?
  - b. What kinds of food do you plan on taking?

### Post-Trip Questions.

Start by asking to be told in detail what one day looked like in China.

1. How was the food in China?
  - a. What did you like about it?
  - b. What did you not like about it?
  - c. Did any food allergies that you had affect you while you were there?
2. How did your perceptions of China compare to your actual experience?
  - a. Was the food like you thought it would be?
  - b. Was it better or worse than you thought it would be and why?
  - c. Would the food determine whether you went back or not?
3. How willing were you to try new foods while there?
  - a. Were you more open to trying things when you knew what they were?
  - b. Did you trust your translator/host's choices and recommendations in food?  
Why or why not?
  - c. Were you more or less adventurous than the other people you were with?
4. Was food an important element to your level of comfort while in China?
  - a. Were you more uncomfortable when you did not have something familiar to eat?
  - b. Did trying new foods make you feel more welcome and at home in China?
5. If you went back to China, would you take American food with you?
  - a. Why or why not?
  - b. Did you want to bring food back from China to America?
  - c. Would you try to go find certain foods you had in China in America?

**APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL**

February 15, 2012

Hannah Hopkins

Department of Speech and Theatre

Protocol Title: "Demystifying the Food in China"

Protocol Number: 12-214

Dear Investigator(s),

I found your study to be exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) continued review. The exemption is pursuant to 45 CFR 46.101(b) (2). This is because your study consists of survey/interview procedures, and information is obtained in such a manner that human subjects cannot be identified.

You will need to submit an end-of-project report to the Office of Compliance upon completion of your research. Complete research means that you have finished collecting data and you are ready to submit your thesis and/or publish your findings. Should you not finish your research within the three (3) year period, you must submit a Progress Report and request a continuation prior to the expiration date. Please allow time for review and requested revisions. Your study expires on February 15, 2015.

Any change to the protocol must be submitted to the IRB before implementing this change. According to MTSU Policy, a researcher is defined as anyone who works with data or has contact with participants. Anyone meeting this definition needs to be listed on the protocol and needs to provide a certificate of training to the Office of Compliance.

Once your research is completed, please send us a copy of the final report questionnaire to the Office of Compliance. This form can be located at [www.mtsu.edu/irb](http://www.mtsu.edu/irb) on the forms page.

Also, all research materials must be retained by the PI or faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) for at least three (3) years after study completion. Should you have any questions or need additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Emily Born

Compliance Officer

615-494-8918