

Little Emperors in the UK: acculturation and food over time

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Abstract

This paper investigates the acculturation process of a group of Chinese students living in the UK. It emerges from a longitudinal study looking at how participants' social ties affect their food consumption. Drafting from an interpretive study using focus groups discussions, it shows that participants' food consumption patterns change over time in relation to participants' social ties. Three acculturation phases have been individuated. They show that ethnic and non-ethnic ties influence participants' acculturation process. Students with strong ethnic ties consume Chinese food for maintaining their ethnic identity and resisting host food culture. Students with weak ethnic ties consume Chinese food to maintain their ethnic identity and global consumer culture food to resist host food culture. Participants with strong non-ethnic ties have a wider knowledge of host food culture, but they do not consume it more than students with weak non-ethnic ties.

Key words: acculturation, social ties, Chinese students, food consumption, global consumer culture.

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1. Introduction

Under the influence of globalization, acculturation becomes a crucial aspect of marketing studies (Cleveland & Chang, 2009). According to Ustuner's & Holt's (2007), acculturation is a phenomenon in which people "socialized in one (minority) culture migrate and so come into continuous first-hand contact with a new (dominant) culture" (p. 41). Since consumers no longer conform to one specific segment due to the growing numbers of immigrants in Western countries, traditional ethnic segmentation becomes problematic (Askegaard, Arnould & Kjeldgaard, 2005). Immigrants are "border consumers" (Penazola, 1994, p. 51) and as such it is difficult to target them with socio-demographic criteria. As a result, both academics and practitioners need to reconsider current cross-cultural advertising (Watson, Lysonsky, Gillan & Raymore, 2002) and marketing strategies (Soares, Farhangmehr & Shoham, 2007) in order to better understand immigrants' needs and wants. Nevertheless, despite the need for research, European marketers are less proactive in studying the behavior of ethnic minority consumers (Jamal, 2003). This lack of interest reflects the limited academic works regarding the acculturation of immigrants in Europe (Askegaard et al., 2005).

In this respect, extant literature regarding Chinese immigrants in Europe is particularly scarce (Vieregge, Lin, Drakopoulos & Bruggmann, 2009). This lack of discussion is inopportune considering that in 2009 over 85,000 young Chinese studied in UK universities (British Council, 2010). Following the rapid economic development and the one child policy in China, young Chinese consumers, defined as 'Little Emperors' for their disposable income

and young age (Wang, 2009), attract various interests in marketing studies. However, studies tend to concentrate their attention on domestic consumption practices and works on Chinese consumers outside China are very limited (Chung, Holdsworth, Li & Fam, 2009).

Considering the lack of attention on acculturation in Europe and the consumption power of the Little Emperors, this research looks at the acculturation food practices of a group of Chinese students over their one year study period in the UK. Responding to Cleveland, Laroche, Pons & Kastoun (2009) call for ethnographic and longitudinal studies on acculturation, this research provides an in-depth analysis of how individuals acculturate to the host culture over time. In doing so, this research shows how students' social relations influence their acculturation process and their food consumption practices. As the research looks at Chinese students' manifestations of the acculturation process in the UK, it helps marketers understand Little Emperors in a foreign context.

2. The acculturation debate

While the body of studies on acculturation is vast and contradictory, it is noteworthy that these works concentrate mainly on individuating outcomes and agents of acculturation. The following sub-sections propose an overview of acculturation outcomes and agents of acculturation from marketing and consumer behavior studies.

2.1 The acculturation outcomes

Inspired by Berry's work (see Berry 2008 for an overview of his work) the examined studies look at acculturation not as a linear process leading to a melting pot, but rather as a multi-modal process not necessarily leading to assimilation of the host culture (Penazola,

1994). According to Berry (2008) the acculturation process can lead to different outcomes. Immigrants adopt the dominant new culture and abandon their original one (assimilation), they embrace both new and old cultures (integration), they withdraw from the new culture and maintain their original one (separation), or they entail a withdrawal from both cultures (marginalization). Consumer research studies give particular attention to the acculturation outcomes, considered synonyms of different identity projects. These studies look at how the consumption of specific items, such as food (Laroche, Kim, Tomiuk & Belisle, 2005) and media (Lee & Tse, 1994), shows immigrants relations with the host and their ethnic culture (Rossiter & Chan, 1998).

Ethnographic studies on acculturation show that immigrants have a hybrid identity combining elements of the host and their ethnic culture. For example, Penazola (1994) suggests that immigrants re-construct hybrid identities by selecting and adopting aspects from both cultures. Similarly Oswald (1999) suggests that immigrants have an integrated identity and they perform it upon the situation and through consumption of ethnic and mainstream products. Askegaard et al. (2005) go so far as to define immigrant identity as fluid and resulting from a mix and match portfolio of identity projects. None of these works describe cases of immigrants who reconstruct their identity entirely adopting the host culture or totally maintaining their home culture. Nevertheless, Ustuner & Holt (2007) is an exception. They describe immigrants without any hybrid or fluid identity. Instead immigrants either maintain their home identity through everyday consumption practices, pursue the dominant culture through mainstream market opportunities, or “give up on both pursuits, resulting in a shattered identity project” (Ustuner & Holt, 2007, p. 41).

Positivistic studies support Ustuner's & Holt's (2007) analysis showing cases of immigrants with assimilated, segregated and integrated identities (Lerman, Maldonado & Luna, 2009). However, others suggest that immigrants have a multiple cultural identity and they "shift between multiple interpretive cultural frames" in consuming home and host culture products (Chattaraman, Rudd & Lennon, 2009, p. 831). Similarly, Cleveland et al. (2009) show that immigrants' retention of the culture of origin and their acquisition of the host culture are two distinct processes and thus "ethnic identity may be retained or even strengthened despite acculturation" (p. 208).

2.2 The acculturation agents

Immigrants' identity derives from a combination of "agents of acculturation" (Askegaard et al., 2005, p. 161), which are factors facilitating or opposing the acculturation outcomes. While studies report divergence in listing these agents, immigrants' personal factor, their social relations and global consumer culture are often considered most influential (Cleveland et al., 2009, Penazola 1994).

Penazola (1994) highlights personal factors, such as age, social class, gender, work status, language ability, recency of arrival and ethnic identity, often influence the acculturation outcome (e.g. young immigrants seem to adapt more readily to the US culture than older immigrants). However, Penazola's study does not take the recency of arrival into in-depth consideration when describing its role in the acculturation process. This lack of consideration seems to be a common characteristic of interpretive and quantitative research. This emphasize the need of a longitudinal perspective, as Ustuner & Holt (2007) point out, current research is time insensitive, and hence recency of arrival needs to be considered in future analysis.

According to Penazola, (1994, p. 49) “family, friends, media, retail businesses, schools, and churches” are other important agents of acculturation because they represent values, norms, lifestyles as well as objects and consumer practices of the home and host culture. However, although immigrants’ relations with home and host culture members prove to reshape their consumption choices (Cleveland & Chang, 2009), it is not evident how social relations could affect the acculturation outcomes.

Granovetter (1973) conceptualizes social relations as strong ties (e.g. friends) and weak ties (e.g. acquaintance). Not all ties influence consumption in the same way: strong ties have a greater influence over individual consumption than weak ties (Chung and Fischer, 1999). In adopting the concept of multiplexity, such as the overlap of roles and affiliations in social relations (Lin, Cook, & Burt, 2001), McAdam & Paulsen (1993) point out that a homophilous tie in terms of ethnicity (hereafter ethnic ties) has a strong influence over individual consumption. In contrast, ties built between individuals from two different ethnic backgrounds (hereafter non-ethnic ties) have a less strong influence. As Mollica, Gray & Trevinoet (2003) explain this difference is because ethnic ties tend to provide valuable sources of mutual support and help maintaining one’s ethnic identity in a foreign environment. Given that this study looks at the acculturation process of Chinese students in the UK, it is noteworthy to mention that Chinese society has a particular kind of social relations – *guanxi*, translated as “connections’ in English (Luo, 1997). *Guanxi* originates from a long Confucian tradition and helps the Chinese constitute the structure of society and interact with their surroundings (Luo, 2001).

Recently some studies discuss global consumer culture (hereafter GCC) as another agent of acculturation (Askegaard et al., 2005). They suggest that acculturation is not a process incorporating host and home culture, but rather a process with “triple acculturation forces” (Wanwara-Mbugua, Cornell & Boller, 2007, p. 83) – including home, host culture and GCC (Cleveland & Laroche, 2007). GCC is a “cultural entity not associated with a single country, but rather a larger group generally recognized as international and transcending individual national cultures” (Alden, Steenkamp & Batra, 1999, p.80). Berry (2008) affirms that GCC is a pervasive aspect of people’s everyday life nowadays and a “starting point of acculturation” (p.332).

The role of GCC in shaping individual identity seems relevant in studying the Little Emperors acculturation process in the UK. Empirical studies looking at young Chinese consumers living in China (Dong & Tian, 2009) and outside China (Chen et al., 2005) show how they create their ethnic identity by consuming or boycotting objects and brands symbolizing GCC values. Given the growing interest in understanding how GCC shape the acculturation process of young Chinese consumers (Wang, 2009), looking at the acculturation process of Chinese students in the UK is significant for both the acculturation and Little Emperors debates.

3. Food consumption in acculturation studies

Sociological and marketing studies underline how food represents an everyday materialization of ethnic identity, thus food choice is considered as a way to resistant change. For example, Mexican immigrants in the USA do not change their diet significantly

(Penazola, 1994); Turkish women maintain the same food rituals and conventions after their immigration (Ustuner & Holt, 2007). Nevertheless, although some immigrants resist to change their food choices, other studies (e.g. Cleveland et al., 2009) show that some immigrants consume ethnic and mainstream products as “complex expressions of overlapping social group membership” (Wallendorf & Reilly, 1987, p. 289).

Studies on Chinese immigrants’ food consumption reveal that Chinese consumers have a stronger ethnic retention in comparison to other minority groups, when living abroad (Chung, 2000). For example, second and even third generations of Chinese immigrants living in Switzerland consume Chinese food at home daily and choose Chinese restaurants as an eating out option (Vieregge et al., 2009). This high retention is probably because “food plays such an important role in Chinese life as to lead many to characterize the Chinese as having a food-centered culture” (Simmons, 1994, p.14).

4. Methodology

4.1 Data Collection

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm and proposes an “in depth analysis of the life stories expressed by a relatively small number of participants” (Thompson, 1996, p. 392). In the academic year 2009/10, the authors conducted four waves of focus group discussions (FGD) over 9 months (September, November, February and May) in order to collect longitudinal data from 12 Chinese students attending one year business program in a University in the Midlands, UK. Morgan (1997) considers FGD the best option for obtaining rich reflections, accounts and discussions about experiences common to all participants.

Topics of discussion include daily consumption routine, shopping, traveling, relations with family and friends in China as well as relations in the UK. All the discussions took place on campus, normally in a pre-booked seminar room. To remind the respondents, the authors sent confirmatory emails and made telephone calls one week and one day before the scheduled discussions. On average each discussion lasted approximately 2 hours. With consent from all participants, authors recorded FGD, which provides the opportunity to later transcribe and analyze participants' dialogues and avoid any loss of supplementary information (Chisnall, 1997).

4.2 Sampling technique and participants' profile

The authors recruited 12 out of a class of 62 Chinese students using purposive (Silveman, 2006) and snowball sampling techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This recruitment implies a sampling bias, as only students interested in talking about food joining the project. However, participants' willingness to share their consumption experiences is most crucial for collecting relevant data. Participants consist of 9 females and 3 males and were aged 21 or 22 years old (See Table 1). They come from similar urban areas in China and have no previous experiences of living abroad. They arrived in the UK during summer 2009 and returned to China in summer 2010. Some participants arrived with a group of friends whom they knew since they were in China. They lived together either in campus accommodation (student flats) or rented private houses. Others arrived individually and tended to stay in campus accommodation sharing with other British or international students.

Table 1 here

4.3 Data analysis

A multicultural team iterated the analysis and as such a “triangulation across co-authors led to new insights and resolved differences in interpretation” (Askegard et al., 2005, p. 163). Beneficial is the fact that both researchers are immigrants (one author is Italian living in the UK for 4 years and the other is Taiwanese living in the UK for 10 years) and thus they negotiate similar acculturation processes to participants. Data analysis and interpretation follows the general guide of interpretive research and hence the authors operate a continuous interaction between data and theoretical frameworks (Silverman, 2006).

5. Results and discussion

Given the longitudinal nature of this research, the authors present the findings in three chronological stages: beginning, middle, and finishing. Each stage is not a discrete point of a linear acculturation process with a clear beginning and an end; rather it presents continuities and discontinuities with the previous and the subsequent stage.

5.1 The Beginning Stage – Where and how can I have ‘My’ Chinese food?

In the first few weeks after their arrival, participants describe British food as GCC food consisting of “pizzas” and “chips, steaks and hamburgers”. Participants seem already familiar with this food, tried in China through GCC manifestations such as McDonald’s and KFC. Having recognized familiar chains and brands, participants use their GCC understanding as a way to make sense of the UK food culture.

“We went to a pub in town and I had fish and chips. Everybody says that fish and chips is a traditional British dish and I want to try it. I didn’t like it! It is nothing special! It is like

KFC food! I thought it was something more special [...] I will not have it again!”

(Yvonne)

Yvonne’s example confirms Penazola’s (1994) idea that acculturation starts before immigration with consuming host culture products. However, Yvonne’s example shows that her acculturation process began in China through consuming GCC rather than UK food. Indeed Yvonne makes sense of the host culture through her pre-immigration understanding of GCC, which becomes her “starting point of acculturation” to the UK culture (Berry, 2008, p.323).

Although other participants do not describe experiences of consuming local food outside the campus, they confirm having tried food at campus canteen and cafés. However, as participants describe food on campus “very plain”, “not acceptable” and “not filling”, they do not consider such food as a daily lunch option. Although all participants resist the host culture food (canteen and cafés food on campus), they adopt two different types of resistance strategies depending on the strength of their ethnic ties (see table 2).

Table 2 here

James, Roma and Lucas are participants with weak ties. They came to the UK on their own and declare having only acquaintances. Despite emphasizing the importance of eating Chinese food daily, they do not eat Chinese food for lunch but opt for GCC food locally available.

“At lunch I don’t go back to the dormitory. I just have something quick like a burger with chips. I go to McDonald’s. [...] I prefer a burger to the canteen food. In China I used to eat there once or twice a week. I am familiar with it.” (Roma)

Roma's consumption of McDonald's shows a different role of GCC in the acculturation process. In this case GCC does not facilitate immigrants' acculturation (Berry, 2008), but a resource for resisting the host culture. Therefore rather than being a way to familiarize immigrants with host culture, GCC is used as a way for avoiding contact with the new culture.

Participants with strong ethnic ties adopt a different strategy for resisting the host culture. They do not rely on consuming GCC locally available, but rather on preparing and sharing homemade Chinese meals with their Chinese friends. Participants also adopt this strategy for maintaining their ethnic identity. As Doris claims "We cannot eat that food (campus food). We are Chinese, this is what we do: we cook our food." In order to eat a homemade Chinese meal, participants describe their lunch time organization as a juggling between their students and domestic life.

"At 12 o'clock we rush home to prepare our lunch. Wenty does the washing, Sherry does the chopping, I do the cooking. Together we make a Chinese meal to enjoy together [...] we cook two meat dishes, one vegetable dish, a soup and some rice." (Doris)

Participants' descriptions of their routine highlight two important aspects for this discussion. Firstly, students do not simply eat Chinese food at lunch time; they recreate a meal with a Chinese structure, which is a combination of specific dishes. This confirms previous works (Ustuner & Holt, 2007) underlining how immigrants recreate home culture conventions, such as the meal structure for maintaining their ethnic identity. Secondly, students also maintain their ethnic identity by sharing their meals with Chinese friends; as Belk (2010) suggests sharing is a crucial aspect for maintaining individual and group identity. Participants attribute

a specific importance to eating together as a way to recreate the home experience and thus reinforce their ethnic identity.

“Being with them is like being in China. In our rented house, we eat Chinese food, we speak Chinese [...] I like eating with them, it makes me feel less homesick [...] I remember to be in the UK when I look outside my windows and I hear people speaking in English.” (Christina)

Regardless of their ties, food provision practices are very new for participants. None of them used to cook before coming to the UK, most of them used to eat at university canteen and at home with their parents. The majority of the students start cooking Chinese food in the UK using Internet recipes or cookbooks bought from China; others like Emma and Doris started cooking with their mothers a few months before coming to the UK.

“I started doing a bit of cooking last July. I started preparing lunch for me and sometimes, when my mother was not at home I cooked for the family. [...] I started cooking simple things that my mum cooks for us, like pieces of pork fried with vegetables.” (Emma)

Dissimilar to Ustuner & Holt (2007), where immigrants maintain their ethnic identity by perpetuating their familiar practices in a new environment, participants engage themselves in new practices, such as food planning and cooking. They adopt these new practices for resisting the host food culture, maintaining their ethnic identity and reinforcing their ethnic ties. Cooking in groups as well as sharing Chinese meals reveals how students perform their ethnic identity at group level, requiring each member to manifest their ethnicity through new consumption practices.

5.2 Middle Stage – We've tried and made some British food!

After staying in the UK for more than 3 months, participants demonstrate not simply a wider knowledge of British food but also a deeper understanding of local food conventions. For example, Cecilia declares that “pizza is not British food, but pies are British food”. This example suggests that over time participants develop their ability to distinguish British food from GCC food. Also such understanding probably derives from the presence of some weak non-ethnic ties which change certain aspects of participants' acculturation (see table 3).

Table 3 here

At this stage, participants describe acquaintances with British people such landlords, neighbors and flatmates. By sharing flats with British students, some participants observe and sample some of their flatmates' meals. For example Emma describes her British flatmates as sources of information on the host culture.

“I look at what they do in the kitchen and ask them to explain to me how to do some dishes that I have seen on TV.” (Emma)

Emma does not simply look at what her flatmates do in the kitchen, she borrows their cookbooks, tries making a couple of dishes herself (e.g. Sunday roast and ‘toad in the hole’) and shares those new dishes with her Chinese friends. Similarly, Doris, Sherry and Wenty seek to recreate a pie that they tried at their landlord's house.

“We enjoyed the cooking, but the dish was not very good! We had to use the oven and I am not very good with it. We used cheese and milk but I do not really like them.” (Doris)

Despite some unsuccessful results, these examples suggest that participants start a “progressive learning” (Wamwaea-Mbugua et al., 2008, p. 87) of the host culture. Although these experiences are challenging, they allow participants to transform unfamiliar ingredients and dishes into familiar ones (Jamal, 2003). Non-ethnic ties are essential in this process of bringing unfamiliar products under control, as flatmates and landlords facilitate the transfer of cultural meanings (Jamal, 2003) by informing and guiding participants in their new consumption experiences.

In comparison, participants with very little contact with British people have less understanding of British food. Their understanding comes from market manifestations. As a result, British food is simply another market option among GCC food chains and international restaurants.

“I like trying new food and going to new places and restaurants [...] we went to few pubs, pizza places, we went to Nando’s in town. Few weeks ago we went to an Indian restaurant in London.” (Mona)

Although participants’ understanding of British food is now more specific, their resistance and maintenance do not significantly change. In the case of eating out options, the presence of ethnic and non-ethnic ties do not influence students’ preference for restaurants. Although students declare a desire to try new cuisines, their experiences of local restaurants remain very limited, with the exception of Mona, who claims to be a food-lover and likes to sample different dishes. Participants attribute their scarce knowledge to being students and having limited financial resources. However, all of them have a good knowledge of the local Chinese restaurants and takeaways, which some consume on a weekly basis. Additionally, participants

declare eating at cafés such as Starbucks when they are visiting other cities. In short, students seem to alternate between GCC and Chinese food when eating out.

Although some participants do experiment with host food culture, everyday practice of resistance and maintenance do not change significantly. They still perpetuate their resistance strategies, e.g. cooking Chinese food or having GCC food locally available. Cecilia explains the perpetuation of their routine of rushing home for a Chinese lunch in these terms:

“Campus food does not make me feel full. If I eat it I feel hungry all day. This food does not fill your head, it fills your stomach, but after a while you are hungry again.”

For Cecilia food on campus represents an absence of familiar dishes, ingredients, brands and meal conventions. She tolerate this absence on special occasions (e.g. during extraordinary meals with British friends), but not on a daily basis. Cecilia is an example of a participant, who shows interest in British food but at the same time maintains her daily routine of having a Chinese meal. Her example confirms that immigrants can learn aspects of the new culture whilst maintaining their own culture (Cleveland et al., 2009). Indeed immigrants’ assimilation of the host culture does not lead to abandoning their ethnic identity, rather demonstrating a membership of both home and host groups on situations (Oswald, 1999).

5.3 Finishing Stage: Thanks for the offer, but I’d rather have my own food!

After 9 months students have all developed fairly strong ethnic ties with fellow Chinese students and some weak non-ethnic ties with British flatmates, landlords, classmates and tutors. Interestingly, whilst some participants also engage in romantic relationships with

fellow British students, the strength of such non-ethnic ties brings in a different dimension to the analysis (see table 4).

Table 4 here

Over time participants establish their routine of cooking Chinese food everyday and integrating some British products into their meals (e.g. British pudding for dessert). This pattern of integration is common to the majority of participants. Moreover, there are also cases where participants consider British food an option for alternative meals.

“I like fish and chips! It’s good! I used to think that they were too greasy. But now I tried it over and over (almost once every two weeks), I am used to this, I like it now. I can have it for dinner and I am satisfied!” (Christina)

There are also some cases of participants abandoning their Chinese meal in favor of British food. For example Cecilia now opts for a British breakfast. Assimilated through her British flatmates, she follows the British convention of having toast with butter and jam in the morning.

“For breakfast I have toast, butter and jam [...] I think it is a very convenient way to have a breakfast. I started doing it because I saw my flatmates doing it and I had a go at it! It is a quick breakfast.” (Cecilia)

Whilst Cecilia shifts from consuming home to host food, there are cases of participants shifting from GCC to home food.

“When I first arrived I was eating ready meals and frozen pizzas all the time. They are very convenient food. It was fun, but when time pass by I started missing my food! Now I have

changed. I wonder how my British flatmates eat this kind of stuff daily. [...] I cook my own Chinese food now. I cannot eat such food anymore!” (Lucas)

These examples show how over time participants re-shape their routine by dynamically integrating GCC, home and host culture. Such integration becomes more complex in presence of strong non-ethnic ties. In cases of romantic relations, negotiation between cultures becomes a central issue in everyday life. For example Laurel finds eating with her British boyfriend a very difficult practice.

“We cannot eat together everyday because we eat different things! I need to eat Chinese food at least five times per week otherwise I’m hungry. [...] Because we cannot eat the same, I eat at mine, he eats at his and then we meet. [...] I’m Chinese and I cannot accept his food. He is English and he cannot eat my soup, he can eat some basic noodles, but that’s it!” (Laurel)

Although Laurel seems to possess a wider knowledge of British food, experienced through her boyfriend and his family and friends, she does not consume more British food than other participants. On the contrary, her romantic relation radicalizes her idea of eating Chinese food for maintaining her ethnic identity. Laurel’s refusal of eating “his” food confirms studies describing the difficulties of interracial couples in combining two food cultures (Root, 2001). For Laurel and her boyfriend, GCC food options, such as Pizza Hut, provide a compromise accepted by both parties. Considered a mutual option, GCC food represents a common terrain wherein cultural diversities desist and a shared understanding of brands, meal structure and conventions takes place.

“Pizza is fine [...] I’m not crazy about pizza, but it’s ok! We can also have chicken wings with barbeque sauce, this is fine. It is something that we can eat together! There is Pizza Hut in China, so I accepted it already.” (Laurel).

Although participants with strong non-ethnic ties possess a wider knowledge of British culture, such knowledge does not imply accepting the host culture, but rather stimulating reflections on cultural differences.

“Before coming to the UK I thought I was very open-minded and different from other Chinese people [...] but now when I talk to my British flatmates, I can see many differences between us. I have different values. I am still an open-minded person, but I am Chinese and I am proud of my values and my culture...” (Cecilia)

Despite some participants have romantic relations with fellow British students; the strength of such non-ethnic ties does not cause a higher assimilation. On the contrary, a deeper understanding of the host culture and the constant contacts with its manifestations radicalize participants’ ideas of maintaining a “we” (Chinese) identity to compare with “they” (British). In this respect participants use everyday food practices as a way of comparing different cultures, maintaining their ethnic identity, assimilating aspects of the host culture, and negotiating their identity with host fellow consumers.

6. Conclusion and implications

This exploratory study examines the acculturation process of a group of Little Emperors through their everyday food consumption in the UK. Adopting a longitudinal perspective, it shows that recency of arrival is an important element for understanding immigrants’ attitude

toward host culture. Findings show how immigrants' progressive learning of the host culture increases over time and participants ties influence their consumption of home, host and GCC food.

This study confirms that acculturation outcomes are fluid rather than discrete and unchangeable results of a pre-determined process. Although participants show a strong resistance and a high level of maintenance, these outcomes oscillate during their stay. This finding confirms Askegaard's et al.'s (2005) work highlighting that immigrants' identities are entities resulting from a mix and match of various acculturation outcomes. Also findings show that immigrants' ethnic identity and acculturation to the host culture are two different, albeit linked, processes and one does not exclude the other. These findings confirm previous works (Chattaraman et al. 2009, Cleveland et al., 2009) showing that a strong ethnic identity does not prevent immigrants from assimilating to the host culture.

Another contribution of this study consists of confirming and advancing the assumption that social ties shape immigrants' consumption choices (Mollica et al., 2003). Findings show that social ties influence participants' resistance and maintenance. Although all participants show a high level of resistance and maintenance during the beginning phase, these outcomes change in relation to their ties. Participants with stronger ethnic ties show higher levels of maintenance to the home culture. Participants with weaker ethnic ties show higher levels of adoption of GCC products and brands as a way to resist the host culture. Moreover, participants with stronger non-ethnic ties demonstrate a wider understating of host culture, but not always a higher level of consumption of British food. In some cases, this understanding

generates an integration of host culture products and brands in Chinese meals, but in others generates a radicalization of maintenance.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of GCC in the acculturation process. It confirms previous works (Askegaard et al., 2005; Cleveland & Laroche, 2007) highlighting how acculturation is a process involving GCC, host and home culture. Also it advances Berry's (2008) analysis by showing how GCC has different functions in the acculturation process. It is a facilitator of the assimilation process, as participants use their pre-existing knowledge of GCC to make sense of the host culture. It is a way to resist the host culture, as participants consume GCC to avoid British food. Finally it is used as a common terrain between immigrants and host fellow consumers and thus a way to negotiate everyday consumption choices on practices, objects and brands.

Some implications for marketers derive from these theoretical contributions. This study questions the traditional market segmentation techniques of using prototypical examples of global and uniform segments (Palan, Gentina & Muratore, 2010). By illustrating how Little Emperors react to the same new context in different ways, it highlights how consumers do not conform to traditional segmentation criteria, such as age and ethnicity. Lifestyle, values, experiential aspects of consumption and occasions involving other fellow consumers influence participants' consumption patterns.

Marketers willing to "speak" to Little Emperors living abroad should consider the recency of their arrival, their lifestyles, their socio-cultural swapping (Oswald, 1999), and the experiential aspects of consumption (Jamal 2003). As Wamwara-Mbugua et al. (2007) suggest marketers willing to understand the needs of immigrants should consider how

immigrants' lifestyles and values change over time in relation to a specific context. Indeed marketers should understand acculturation as a transformative experience incorporating different forces, such as GCC, host and local cultures, in specific contexts. Moreover, businesses should consider the use of social ties and reference group when targeting Little Emperors overseas.

6.1 Limitations and future research

The findings of this research derive from a small number of participants and hence replications of the study are necessary. Conducting further research looking at Chinese students' acculturation could provide a stronger validation for this research. Moreover the homogeneity of participants in terms of recency of arrival and geographical provenance constitute other limitations. It is possible that some of the acculturation patterns noted in this study are the results of participants' socialization in their area of provenance, rather than cultural differences generalizable to all Little Emperors. Selecting a sample containing students from different parts of China and with different recency of arrival could improve the strength of the results.

The possibility of sampling bias impacting upon the findings is another limitation. Although purposive sampling assures the selection of people willing to talk about their consumption, differences in their talkativeness may account for some of the differences between participants (Palan et al., 2010). Further research could adopt in-depth interviews and observations as a way to obtain richer data from all participants. Also triangulating these data could improve the validity of the findings.

Despite these limitations, this research shows the impact of immigrants' ethnic and non-ethnic ties on their food consumption. Further longitudinal research could extend this research by monitoring participants for a longer period of time and looking at other consumption practices. Finally further studies could look at Little Emperors in other countries. The global impact of Little Emperors (Wang, 2009) and their increasing presence in Western universities (Chung et al., 2009) suggest that further research is necessary.

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Table 1: Participant Profiles

Participants	Gender	Arrival Mode	Accommodation	Roommates
Mona*	F	Together	Student flat on campus	Each other and British students
Yvonne*	F			
Laurel*	F	Sole	Student flat on campus	British and international students
Cecelia*	F	Sole	Private house	Each other and some British students
Emma*	F	Together		
Christina*	F			
Doris*	F	Together	Private house	Each other
Wenty*	F			
Sherry*	F			
Lucas*	M	Sole	Student flat on campus	British and international students
James*	M	Sole	Student flat on campus	Chinese and British students
Roma*	M	Sole	Student flat on campus	British and international students

*pesudo names are used.

Table 2: Beginning stage: Food consumption with strong and weak ethnic ties

	With strong ethnic ties	With weak ethnic ties
Resistance	Avoiding campus canteen and cafés.	
	Cooking Chinese food at home.	Consuming GCC food options.
Maintenance	Cooking and sharing Chinese meals for lunch & dinner with Chinese friends.	Cooking and eating Chinese dinner alone.

Table 3: Middle stage: Food consumption with ethnic and non-ethnic ties

	With ethnic ties	With non-ethnic ties
Resistance	Avoiding campus canteen and cafés through consumption of Chinese and GCC food options.	
Maintenance	Eating out at local Chinese restaurants and takeaways.	
	Sharing Chinese meals with Chinese friends.	Sharing Chinese meals with British friends.
Assimilation	Sporadic consumption of British food (together with other Chinese and GCC eating out options).	Some domestic consumption of British food through British acquaintances Experiment cooking some British dishes at their own kitchen.

Table 4: Finishing stage: Food consumption with strong and weak non-ethnic ties

	With weak non-ethnic ties	With strong non-ethnic ties
Resistance	Consuming Chinese food as a daily routine and substituting GCC with Chinese food.	Refusing everyday consumption of British food by adopting GCC as compromise between British and Chinese preferences.
Maintenance	Sharing Chinese meals and eating out at local Chinese restaurants with Chinese friends.	Eating Chinese food on a daily basis but sharing occasional Chinese meals with British friends.
Assimilation	Integrating some British products into the Chinese meals and consume some of the British dishes occasionally.	Consuming domestic British food with British friends on a regular basis; thus developing better knowledge of what British food is.