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The influence of country of origin on Chinese food consumers

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Abstract

The Chinese food market is very large and represents a significant opportunity for overseas companies. If this opportunity is to be exploited, however, there is still a need to understand the Chinese consumer's response to production by different countries of origin. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to provide insight into the country of origin effect on the purchase of food products in China. The paper reports the findings of an empirical study conducted in Beijing that was based on a large-scale street survey of consumers. Despite limitations related to representativeness and self-reporting, the study generated a number of useful insights. Specifically, the findings suggest that food originating from overseas is perceived to be of higher quality than food originating from China and that Chinese consumers do not see food originating overseas as all the same but relate quality to the country from which it originates. Food originating from overseas had a perceived advantage in the minds of Chinese consumers, although there is still an inclination to buy Chinese food which may serve as a barrier to entry in this market for overseas companies who do not produce in China itself.

Keywords: Country-of-origin; food marketing; Chinese food market; China; food consumers.

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Introduction

According to a United Nations report (2012) the population of China currently stands at 1.3 billion people. The challenge of feeding this many people is in itself not inconsiderable but in recent times there has been a number of well publicised instances of failure within the Chinese food supply chain (e.g. Custance et al, 2012). As a consequence of both meeting demand and overcoming the weaknesses within the domestic supply chain there has been an increasing tendency for China to import food products. Indeed, The National Bureau of Statistics of China (2011) reports that Chinese imports of food have risen from US $9.9bn in 2006 to US $21.6 in 2010. Figures like this have led researchers like Huan-Niemi and Niemi (2009) to claim that "*The Chinese food market is considered as one of the most dynamic and promising food markets for EU agricultural exports*".

However, while the Chinese market for food products is huge and represents a significant opportunity for overseas food companies, there is still a need to understand the Chinese consumer's response to a product's Country Of Origin (COO) if it is to be exploited successfully. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to investigate the impact of COO on food consumers in China. The paper will detail the methodology used to gather primary data, present the findings, and discuss them in respect of existing theory prior to considering the practical and theoretical implications in the conclusion. To begin, however, it is useful to consider the theory relating to COO.

Country of Origin

Schooler (1965) is often credited as being the first researcher to report on the impact of COO. In more recent times, the subject has taken on greater significance because of the growth in international trade (Han, 2010) and is now considered a *"…relevant and powerful influence.."* on consumer buying decisions (Diamantopoulos et al, 2011) and hence, an important source of brand equity (Norouzi and Hosienabadi, 2011).

Initially, COO was simply defined as *"…the national origin…"* of products (Schooler, 1965) but over time, as companies have adopted various types of overseas sourcing in order to attain competitive advantage, the subject has become more complex (Chu et al, 2010). In addition to COO, researchers have now considered Country Of Design (Ahmed and d'Astous, 1996; Biswas et al, 2011), Country Of Assembly (Ahmed and d'Astous, 1996; Biswas et al, 2011; Showers and Showers, 1993), Country Of Parts (Biswas et al, 2011; Showers and Showers, 1993), Country Of Headquarters (Showers and Showers, 1993); Country Of Manufacture (Ha-Brookshire, 2012; Newman and Dhar, 2014; Prendergast et al, 2010; Uddin et al, 2013), and Country Of Brand (Magnusson et al, 2011; Martin and Cervino, 2011; Norouzi and Hosienabadi, 2011; Prendergast et al, 2010; Uddin et al, 2013).

According to Han (2010), COO "*…has attracted extensive attention from academic researchers and marketers for over 35 years*". Indeed, a search of peer reviewed papers on the Business Source Complete database in August 2014 using the term *"country of origin"* generated 4,668 papers based on research conducted in countries that extend across the globe. A selection of papers looking specifically at COO are presented in Table 1.

Hamin and Elliott (2006) point out that much of the early research into COO was conducted in developed countries and focused on products made in developing countries. More recently, a growing body of literature has evolved based on research undertaken in developing countries and this has provided some interesting insights into the subject of COO. For instance, Agbonifoh and Elimimian (1999) identified a trend for consumers in developing countries to perceive products from developed countries as better than those from developing countries; a phenomenon that they refer to as *"reverse ethnocentrism"*.

Most research focuses on tangible consumer products such as automobiles (Ahmed and d'Astous, 1996; Chinen and Sun, 2011; Sohail, 2005; Speece and Nguyen, 2005; Wang and Yang, 2008; Wong et al, 2008), VCRs (Ahmed and d'Astous, 1996), televisions (Biswas et al, 2011; Hamin and Elliott, 2006; Yasin et al, 2007); personal computers (Prendergast et al, 2010), digital cameras (Wong et al, 2008), refrigerators (Yasin et al, 2007), and air-conditioners (Yasin et al, 2007), as well as some foods such as pickles (Liefeld et al, 1996); beer (Phau and Suntornnond, 2006), apples (Plastina et al, 2011), meat and fish (Taylor and Tonsor, 2013; Tonsor et al, 2013; Verbeke and Roosen, 2009), potato chips (Zbib et al, 2010a), seafood (Kuchler et al, 2010), and wine (Balestrini and Gamble, 2006; Bruwer and Buller, 2012; Hamlin and Leith, 2006; Hu et al, 2008; Olsen et al, 2002). However, research now includes intangible consumer services (Javalgi et al, 2001; Michaelis et al, 2008) with specific studies focusing on international cruise-line packages (Ahmed et al, 2002), insurance and catering (Lin and Chen, 2006), international airlines (Hamin and Elliott, 2006) and also industrial markets (e.g. Insch, 2003) and management (Goralski and Salgado, 2014).

Much of the research into COO relates to a simple conceptual model that involves antecedents, moderators, and outcomes. Pharr (2005) defines antecedents as being *"…the precursors to or determinants of a construct"* and in the case of COO include demographic variables (Hanzaee, 2008, Richardson Jr, 2012), social class, travel abroad, and education (Paswan and Sharma, 2004), motivation and ability to process information (Ferguson et al, 2008), ethnocentrism (Chattalas and Takada, 2013; Ferguson et al, 2008; Sharma, 2011; Wong et al, 2008; Xu et al, 2013; Zolfagharian and Sun, 2010; and Zolfagharian et al, 2014), animosity to other ethnic groups, (Jiménez and Martin, 2012; Richardson Jr, 2012), cultural orientation (Ferguson et al, 2008; Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran, 2000), materialism and value consciousness (Sharma, 2011).

Table 1. COO studies by country

Country	Studies
Australia	Josiassen et al (2008); Josiassen and Assaf (2010); Melnyk et al, (2012); Phau and Suntornnond (2006)
Bangladesh	Biswas et al (2011)
Burkina Faso	Ferguson et al (2008)
Canada	Ahmed and d'Astous (2008)
China	Ahmed et al (2002); Balestrini and Gamble (2006); Ha-Brookshire, J.E. (2012); Hu et al (2008); Kumara and Canhua (2010); Prendergast et al (2010); Sharma (2011); Wang and Yang (2008); Wong et al (2008)
Germany	Koschate-Fischer et al, (2012)
Ghana	Ferguson et al (2008)
Holland	Liefeld et al (1996)
India	Sanyal and Datta (2011); Sharma (2011)
Indonesia	Hamin and Elliott (2006)
Iran	Hanzaee (2008)
Ivory Coast	Ferguson et al (2008)
Japan	Bruwer, and Buller (2012); Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran (2000); Koubaa (2008)
Kuwait	Maher and Carter (2011)
Lebanon	Zbib et al (2010a, 2010b)
Malaysia	Sohail (2005); Yasin et al (2007)
Mali	Ferguson et al (2008)
Mexico	Insch (2003); Zolfagharian and Sun (2010)
Morocco	Ahmed and d'Astous (2008)
New Zealand	Beverland and Lindgreen (2002); Hamlin and Leith (2006); Melnyk et al, (2012)
Nigeria	Agbonifoh and Elimimian (1999); Ferguson et al (2008)
Pakistan	Khan and Bamber (2007)
Poland	Michaelis et al (2008)
Sweden	Hayden and Edwards (2001)
Taiwan	Ahmed and d'Astous (2008); Han (2010); Lin and Chen (2006)
Turkey	Tigli et al (2010)
United Kingdom	Hamlin and Leith (2006); Hu and Wang (2010); Sharma (2011)
USA	Chattalas and Takada (2013); Chinen and Sun (2011); Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran (2000); Ha-Brookshire, J.E. (2012); Ha-Brookshire and Yoon (2012); Hu and Wang (2010); Insch (2003); Kim (2006); Kuchler et al (2010); Lim et al (2014); Plastina et al (2011); Sharma (2011); Taylor and Tonsor (2013); Tonsor et al (2013); Xu et al (2013); Zolfagharian and Sun (2010);
Vietnam	Speece and Nguyen (2005)

Moderators are factors that serve to reduce the impact of an effect. In the case of COO, factors that serve as moderators include context (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2002; Josiassen et al, 2008; Josiassen and Assaf, 2010), consumers' education (Martin and Cervino, 2011), consumers product knowledge (Phau and Suntornnond, 2006), product expertise (Chiou, 2003), product familiarity (Josiassen et al, 2008; Phau and Suntornnond, 2006), brand familiarity (Koschate-Fischer et al, 2012), product origin congruency or typicality (Josiassen et al, 2008; Tseng and Balabanis, 2011), product type and category level (Tseng and Balabanis, 2011), trust (Jiménez and Martin, 2014; Kabadayi and Lerman, 2011; Michaelis et al, 2008) and perceived risk (Lim et al, 2014).

In terms of measuring the COO effect researchers have made use of a number of dependent variables. The main variables used to evaluate COO are product quality (Ahmed and d'Astous, 1996; Ahmed et al, 2002; Balestrini and Gamble, 2006; Biswas et al, 2011; Hamin and Elliott, 2006; Insch, 2003; Jian and Guoqun, 2007; Liefeld et al, 1996; Peterson and Jolibert, 1995; Tigli et al, 2010; Wong et al, 2008) and purchase intentions (Ahmed et al, 2002; Hamin and Elliott, 2006; Jian and Guoqun, 2007; Kim, 2006; Liefeld et al, 1996; Peterson and Jolibert, 1995; Prendergast et al, 2010; Tigli et al, 2010; and Wong et al, 2008). Researchers have also employed purchase value (Ahmed and d'Astous, 1996; Liefeld et al, 1996), purchase evaluation (Han, 2010), and brand image as dependent variables (Kim, 2006; Koubaa, 2008).

In practice, the findings of research studies into COO have been mixed. Some studies have failed to find a statistically significant correlation between COO and purchase evaluation (eg Zbib et al, 2010a and 2010b), while others have noted a reduced impact when tested as a multiple cue (Peterson and Jolibert, 1995). However, there is evidence to suggest that *"product quality is perceived lower when a brand from a developed country is manufactured in developing countries…"* (Jian and Guoqun, 2007). There is also evidence to suggest that consumers are willing to pay a higher price for a reputable COO and expect greater price discounts for less reputable COO (Han, 2010; Hu and Wang, 2010). And there is a question, therefore, of whether countries with a poor COO image need to obscure the COO (Ha-Brookshire and Yoon, 2012; Kim, 2006; Melnyk et al, 2012) or counter the effect with low prices (Speece and Nguyen, 2005). Further, it would appear that COO can be an important aspect of corporate strategy (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2002; Clarke et al, 2000) especially when entering an emerging market (Khan and Bamber, 2007). It is also an important factor impacting brand personality (Wang and Yang, 2008) and in determining brand equity (Pappu et al, 2006; Sanyal and Datta, 2011; and Yasin et al, 2007). Indeed, any company considering marketing products overseas would appear to be well advised to investigate the COO amongst potential consumers in order to understand the likely impact on sales. To this end, a project was undertaken in the Chinese market to understand the impact of various aspects of COO in respect to a number of food products.

Methodology

The study was primarily based on a large-scale street survey of Chinese consumers. A questionnaire was developed from the literature and the results of two focus group discussions. The questionnaire incorporated sections on general food shopping, factors impacting the purchase of food products, the image of selected counties, attitudes toward food shopping, and personal background. The questions took the form closed and short answer questions which were presented on just four sides of A4 paper to facilitate completion in the street environment. The questionnaire was subsequently piloted with 40 Chinese students to ensure that the questions were accurate and unambiguous. The street survey was conducted in all the main shopping districts of Beijing because of the relative wealth of its residents. This makes Beijing untypical of China as a whole but seemed appropriate for this study as it was assumed to be a key market for food imported into China. All the fieldwork was completed in January 2012. Respondents to the street survey were selected via a quota sampling technique which sought to match the sample to the Chinese population using a number of key characteristics (see Table 2). A total of 800 people took part in the survey which gives the results statistical significance of 95% with +/- 4% accuracy (West, 1999). The data was analysed using SPSS v21. Sensitivity to environmental factors, including culture, is essential when research crosses national borders (Malhotra et al, 2012) and in order to embrace this point the project team included Chinese nationals who had input to the whole research process but especially the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Table 2. - Sample Profile

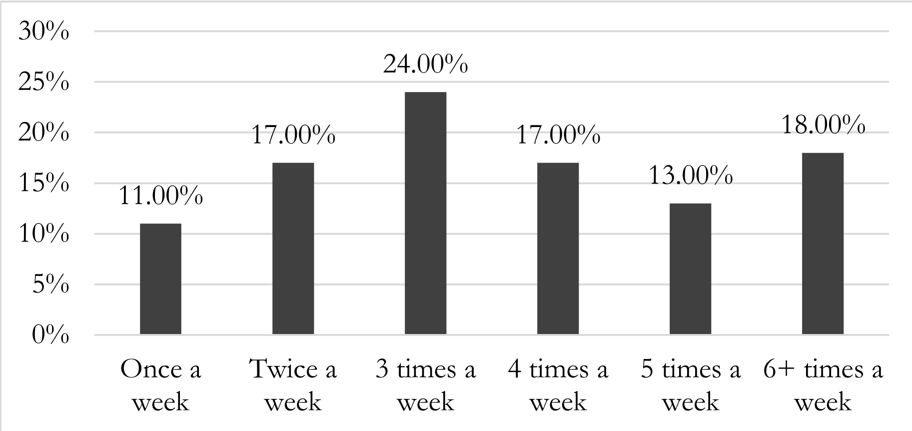
	Population	Sample
Age		
0 -14	222,590,000 (16.6%)	92(11.5%)
15 – 65	999,380,000 (74.5%)	626 (78.4%)
65 +	118,940,000 (8.9%)	82(10.3%)
Average Urban Household Size	2.88	3.2
Average Annual Income	RMB 36,539.00	RMB 31,525.63
Gender		
Male	687,480,000 (51.27%)	400 (50.0%)
Female	653,430,000 (48.73%)	400 (50.0%)

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China (2011)

Results

Almost half of the respondents (42.8%) indicated that they undertook the majority of food shopping for their family. The modal frequency of shopping was reported to be three times a week (see Figure 1) although many Chinese people appear to shop almost daily possibly because of a desire to eat fresh food but more likely due to difficulties in storing food.

Figure 1. Frequency of Food Shopping



The modal annual expenditure on food was 5,000-9,999 RMB (see Figure 2) which, at the time of the original survey, converts to £502.13- £1,004.17[1] This suggests that personal expenditure on food in China is still fairly low compared to Western countries such as the UK where annual per person expenditure on food is approximately £1,152.67[2] but it has grown significantly in recent years and this is a trend that appears set to continue.

Unsurprisingly, given the spread of retail chains in Chinese cities in recent years, the majority of the respondents do their food shopping in supermarkets (see Figure 3). This may represent a good opportunity for overseas food producers to enter the Chinese market. The power of the multiple retailers is not as great as in some Western countries because there are many more companies in the market (Marketline 2014a and 2014b) but their presence at all has served to consolidate what until recent years has been a fragmented market.

When asked to rate five factors that impact the purchase of food on a five point scale where one is slightly important and 5 is very important (see Figure 4) the respondents placed COO fifth. This result might tempt some to dismiss the impact of COO in the context of food purchase in China, so it is important to make the point that while COO is not the most important of the

[1] Source: Expedia.com, 27th July 2012.
[2] Calculated as average weekly household expenditure on food of £53.20 (Office for National Statistics, 2011) x 52 weeks = £2,766.40 per annum / average household size of 2.4 people (Office for National Statistics, 2012) = £1,152.67.

listed product attributes the fact that it had a mean score of 2.8530 suggests that it is of some importance and that producers ignore it at their peril.

Figure 2. Annual Food Spend

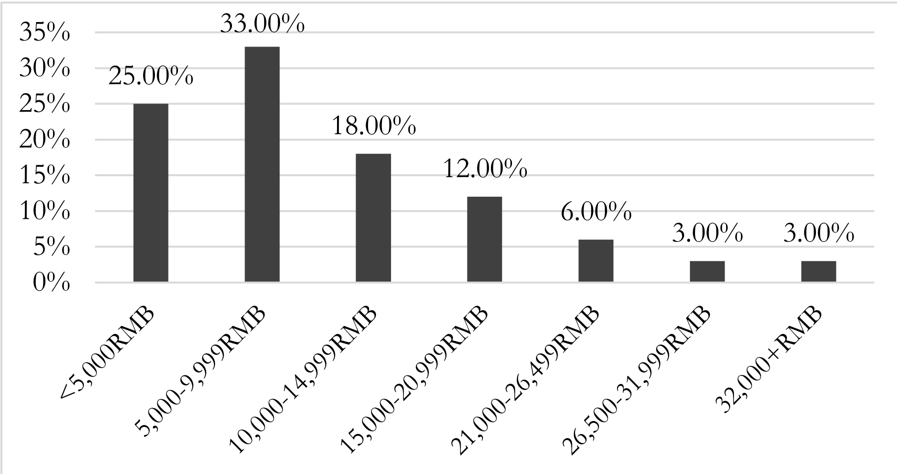
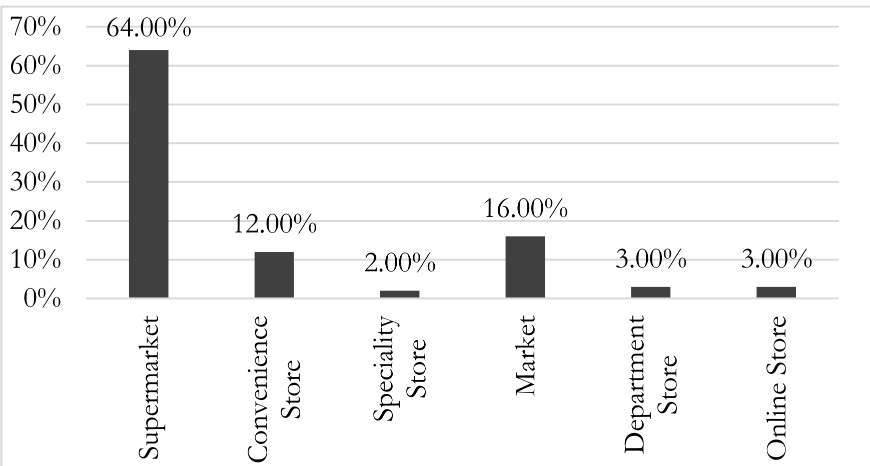


Figure 3. Place of Food Shopping



When the respondents were subsequently asked about the importance of COO in respect of the purchase of a variety of specific food products it became apparent that it was considered of some importance in each and every case but was most important in the purchase of wine, chocolate and milk (see Figure 5). In the case of wine, these results were not unexpected as they support the findings of previous studies by Balestrini and Gamble (2006) and Hu et al (2008).

Figure 4. The Importance of Factors Impacting the Purchase of Food Products

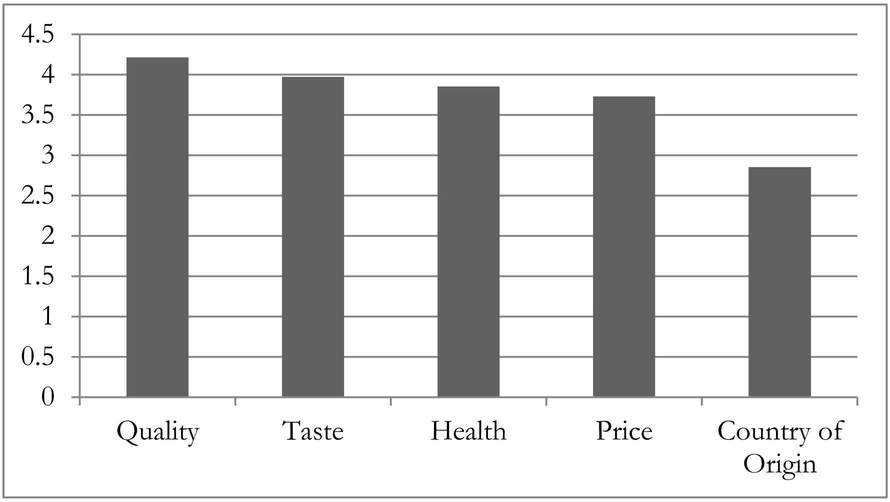
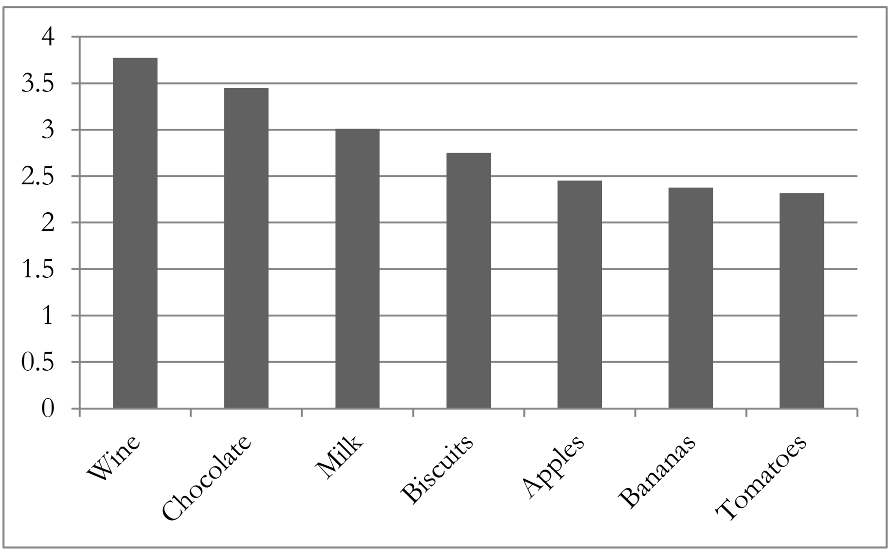
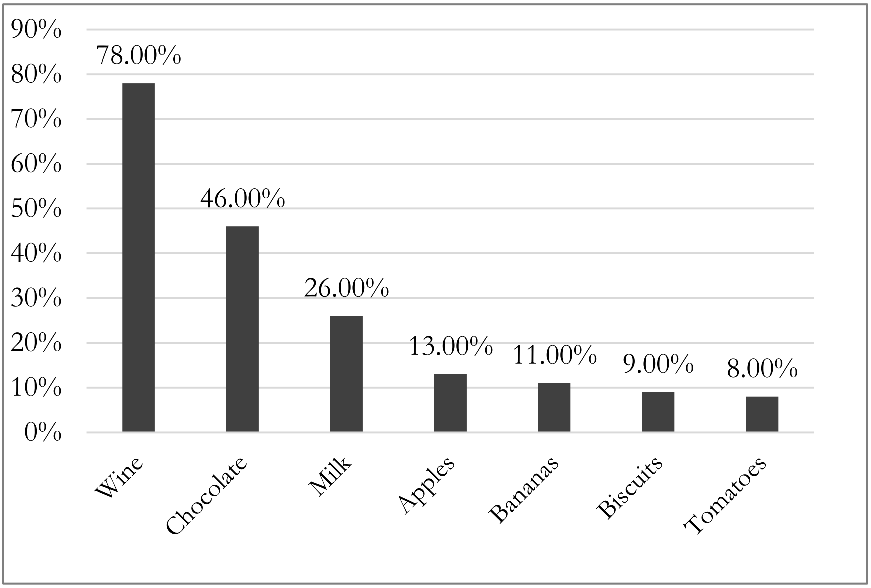


Figure 5. Importance of Country of Origin in the Purchase of Specific Products



One very topical and interesting aspect of business in China is the development of the luxury market (Chevalier and Lu, 2010; Lu, 2008) and, as a consequence, the respondents were presented with a list of various foods and asked to indicate which, if any, they considered to be luxury products. The results shown in Figure 6 suggest that the three products identified as being those where COO plays the most important role in the purchase decision are also seen as being the more luxurious products which hints at a link between COO and perceived luxury. Also, it is apparent that a proportion of the respondents indicate that all the foods listed are items of luxury. This is probably explained by the *"relativity"* of luxury (Berthon et al, 2009; Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Shukla, 2010) and the fact that some of the respondents have a very low income. In both instances, the link between COO and luxury may serve as the basis for a marketing strategy for foreign companies entering the Chinese market for the first time.

Figure 6. – Products Perceived to be *"Luxury"* Items



Another important factor that influences the impact of COO is quality and to investigate this factor, the respondents were asked to rate listed countries by the quality of the food products that they produce. The countries that the respondents rated most highly were the US, Germany, and the UK while the countries that received lower ratings were Korea, China and India (see Figure 7). The ability of the respondents to rate the listed countries in this way appears to add to the substantial amount of research (Ahmed and d'Astous, 1996; Ahmed et al, 2002; Balestrini and Gamble, 2006; Biswas et al, 2011; Hamin and Elliott, 2006; Insch, 2003; Jian and Guoqun, 2007; Liefeld et al, 1996; Peterson and Jolibert, 1995; Tigli et al, 2010; and Wong et al, 2008) that supports the existence of a relationship between COO and perceived product quality. The fact that the Chinese consumers appeared to prefer products originating from developed countries the most and products originating from developing countries the least concurs with work completed by Okechuku (1994). This finding may be explained by the apparent association in consumers' perception between food quality and the strength of food legislation in these different countries (see Figure 8). However, the fact that the Chinese respondents rate China with low scores in terms of food quality and Western countries with higher scores reinforces the opportunity for overseas companies to enter the Chinese market.

Figure 7. Country and Perceived Food Quality

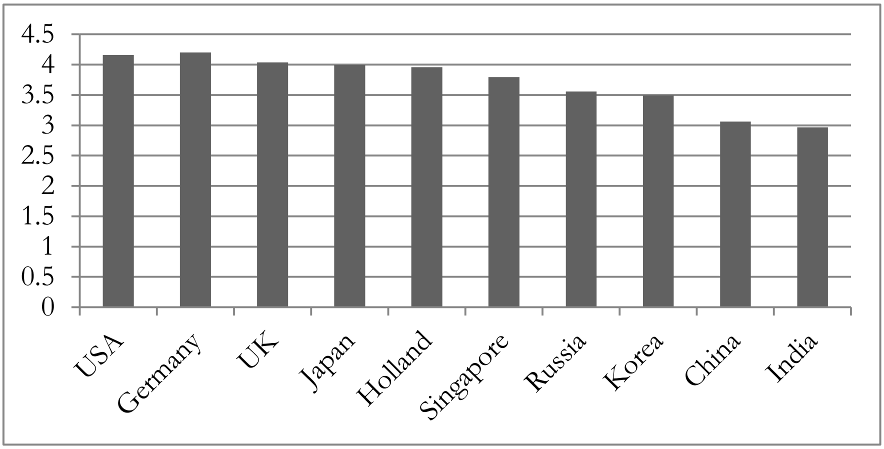
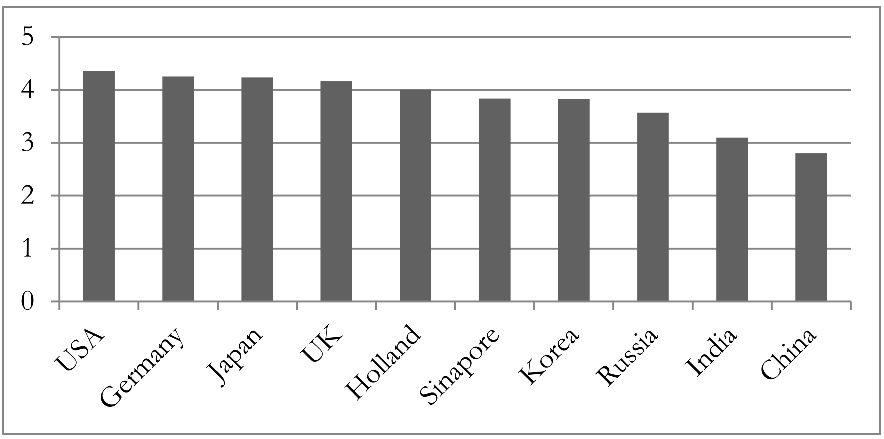


Figure 8. Country and Perceived Strength of Food Laws



Finally, the respondents were asked to complete a battery of attitude statements using a five point scale where one was strongly agree and five strongly disagree. The results are presented in Table 3 and provide further insight into the role that COO plays in influencing the purchase of food products in China. In the first instance, it is interesting to note the proportion of respondents who Neither Agree nor Disagree with the statements or who have opted for the Don't Know option. In many instances this proportion is very high relative to consumer surveys in the UK. While it is possible that the high proportion of respondents who hold no opinion may be due to the subject it is more likely that the benign media in China has not challenged conventional wisdom and so the respondents have never had a reason to consider these matters further.

Of those that hold an opinion, a majority tend to buy the same food products week after week (66%), which appears to confirm the habitual nature of food purchase decisions in China. In addition, 49% agree that when buying food they consider low price a priority and are less concerned with where the food came from, 52% do not believe that COO affects what they buy, and 40% do not always read the labels on food packaging to see where food has been produced. These results suggest that COO does not play a particularly important role in the decisions to purchase food in China and that the Chinese food market is fairly traditional and conservative without much appetite for products made by overseas companies. This, however, is not the whole story.

A majority of respondents offered opinions, both positive and negative, regarding premium pricing of food produced abroad (54%), the purchase of food produced in China (81%), and food produced in China by a foreign company (63%). These findings imply that COO does impact the decision to purchase food in China. Further, 48% overtly indicate that COO affects what they buy and some 39% would be willing to pay a premium for food produced abroad.

A significant proportion of respondents (34%) do not buy the same food products week after week while 60% do always read the labels on food packaging to see where food has been produced. In addition, the majority of respondents (63%) offer a view on whether food produced by a foreign company in China is of a better quality than food produced by a Chinese company. It would appear, therefore, that for some consumers' food purchasing involves thought and evaluation and is an extended problem solving activity.

The conflicting survey evidence would appear to suggest that the Chinese market for food products comprises of two segments based on people's disposition toward food and the role played by COO. One segment is based on consumers who are content to habitually shop for the same products week after week and for whom COO does not influence their food purchases. The second segment, however, does invest time and intellect in deciding what food products to buy and as a consequence these consumers may be influenced by COO.

Table 3. – Attitudes Toward Aspects of Food Purchase (n=800)

	Strongly Agree (1)	**Slightly Agree (2)**	**Neither Agree Nor Disagree (3)**	**Slightly Disagree (4)**	**Strongly Disagree (5)**	**Don't Know (6)**	**Mean**	**Expressed an opinion (n=)**
I tend to buy the same food products week after week	126 (15.8%)	258 (32.3%)	184 (23.0%)	140 (17.5%)	58 (7.3%)	34 (4.3%)	2.6684	582
When buying food low price is more important than where the food came from	63 (7.9%)	196 (24.5%)	217 (27.1%)	180 (22.5%)	88 (11.0%)	56 (7.0%)	3.0457	527
Country of origin doesn't affect what I buy	54 (6.8%)	211 (26.4%)	241 (30.1%)	171 (21.4%)	71 (8.9%)	52 (6.5%)	2.9920	507
I always read the labels on food packaging to see where food has been produced	92 (11.5%)	240 (30.0%)	180 (22.5%)	160 (20.0%)	59 (7.4%)	69 (8.6%)	2.8003	551
I will pay a premium for food produced abroad	37 (4.6%)	129 (16.1%)	311 (38.9%)	179 (22.4%)	85 (10.6%)	59 (7.4%)	3.1970	430
I always buy food produced in China	204 (25.5%)	365 (45.6%)	129 (16.1%)	53 (6.6%)	23 (2.9%)	26 (3.3%)	2.1292	645
Food produced by a foreign company in China is of a better quality than food produced by a Chinese company	67 (8.4%)	181 (22.6%)	234 (29.3%)	165 (20.6%)	93 (11.6%)	60 (7.5%)	3.0486	506

Conclusions

This paper reports the findings of a survey of Chinese food consumers. It is based on a large sample size of 800 respondents which imbues the results with 95% confidence and +/- 4% accuracy (West, 1999). The main limitation of the survey is its representativeness. Despite the sample size, associated statistical significance, and apparent similarity to Chinese population statistics it is quite possible that because the survey was undertaken in the Beijing area the findings may not reflect people's attitudes outside of the major cities. An additional limitation is the fact that the findings are based on self-reports and people may not actually do what they say they are doing.

Despite the potential limitations the survey has generated some useful commercial insights into a potentially lucrative but somewhat distant and complex international food market. Specifically, it appears that the Chinese food market may be segmented into consumers who buy habitually and who do not consider factors such as COO, and consumers who do spend time and effort in deciding what food products to buy and who do take COO into account when making purchase decisions. This latter segment may very well represent an opportunity for overseas food producers (especially those from the USA, Germany, and the UK) but executives should be aware that while likely to be growing, the opportunity is not as big as it might at first appear because the segment includes consumers who favour food made in China as well as consumers who prefer food made overseas, and of course, it is only the latter group who could be considered a potential market for companies from overseas.

In addition to the commercial findings the study also provides academic insight into the role played by COO in the purchase of food products. Evidence relating to the impact of COO in food purchasing is contradictory. Kuchler et al (2010) found that when labelling of seafood in the USA was made mandatory in 2002 it had no impact on consumers' purchasing decisions. However, Josiassen and Assaf (2010) and Verbeke and Roosen (2009) concluded that COO does have an impact on food consumers' purchasing decisions albeit in the former case due to image and congruency of product origin, and in the latter case because of associated *"healthiness"*.

The results of the current paper, while also apparently contradictory, may go some way to reconcile the conflicting views of the impact of COO in food purchasing. Historically, food has often been perceived as a low value Fast Moving Consumer Good (FMCG) which is also a low involvement item (eg Ahmed et al, 2004; Zbib et al, 2010a). However, the present study would suggest that this view is not always correct as this product focus is somewhat limited. Indeed, the consumer focus of this study indicates a market segmentation based on consumer involvement itself. While for many the buying of food is a routine, habitual type purchase, for what may be a small but possibly growing segment, it is a higher (though not necessarily *"high"*) involvement activity in which COO would appear to play a role. In respect of Kuchler et al's (2010) study it is quite possible that either the segment had not developed in 2002 when the work was carried out, it does not exist in the USA (which is hard to believe), it was too small to detect, or even that such a segment may not exist for seafood products.

It would appear pertinent to conclude, therefore, that while this study has generated some evidence to suggest that for some Chinese people food purchasing is a higher involvement activity which may take into account COO, numerous questions relating to the level of involvement associated with specific food products and contexts suggest the need for much more research in this area. Specifically, it appears useful to conduct research to confirm a segmentation of the Chinese market for food products based on involvement, research to identify key characteristics of the segments, and research to determine the size of the segments.

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