



THE SEARCH FOR ETHICAL FOOD CHOICE MOTIVES: THE CHINESE
ORGANIC FOOD MARKET

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the values / concepts that impact the purchasing decision of Chinese consumer to buy or not to buy organic food.

Design/ methodology: This study draws data from a questionnaire filled out by 457 Chinese middle class consumer.

Findings: The results show those Chinese consumers are aware of ethical concerns when actually making buying decisions. "Environment" is perceived more important than "price". Animal rights and general treatment of animals play little to know role.

Limitation / Implication: Further research should consider social norms and believes and gain a deeper understanding how "face saving" (rooted deeply in this collectivistic culture) could be used to develop the organic food market further

Originality / value: Prior research on organic food decision making in China has focused too much on price sensitivity, while this paper offers new possible fields that impact the buying. The findings that consumer are willing to pay 30% more on certified guaranteed organic food offers new opportunities for market players like food chain stores or importer of organic food.

Keywords: Organic food China, Ethical food choice, consumer, green purchasing, Theory of planned behaviour, green food



INTRODUCTION

The Chinese organic food market has seen a dramatic development since the first product was certified as organic in 1990 (Kledal, Hui, Egelyng, Yunguan, & Halberg, 2007). When at that time the first product (tea) was certified, the producer had to resort to a Dutch certification body (ITC, 2011).

Nowadays Chinese producer can choose from 57 domestic organisation that can certify, while for example in the USA only 40 organisation certify and ensure the organic product's origin and quality (Willer, 2016).

China is worldwide the 4th biggest producer of organic food (in terms of land being certified organic) and accounts for 5% of the global consumption of organic food (followed by Canada) (Willer, 2016). The economic development and the establishment of a growing middle class that has more access to information and has led the Chinese domestic organic market to be double the size than the value of exported organic food items (for example 2008 1.1 billion USD vs. 500 mio USD worth of organic exports) (ITC, 2011).

A growing research effort in being diverted to the question what makes Chinese consumer go buy organic, most research seems to focus on motivators that impact buying intention like health concern, status (Anufrieva, 2015), while others like Chan et al (Y., 2002) try to apply the Theory of Planned Behaviour and see if it can explain the eco friendly purchase across different cultures and further more they believe that group conformity plays the most important part when opting for organic food. In other or (different GmbH Strategieagentur , 2008) organic food markets -for example Germany-, buying organic food is found to be one way for consumers to "do something" actively for the environment.

Interestingly so far there is no evidence, that organic food positively impact health (Magkos F, 2003), a fact that has -so far- not stopped the further growth of the organic food market, for example "organic" is relevant to 97% of the German consumer (different GmbH Strategieagentur , 2008)

The biggest group of Chinese consumer opting for organic food are white-collar families (ITC, 2011) who account for more than 40% of the organic market. This group is followed by families with children, people with health issues and returnees, i.e. Chinese students or scholars who return from overseas where they got to know the idea of organic foods.

This study will focus on the urban middle class of China, as from income, education and exposure to new concepts they seem to be more likely to adapt.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Ethical values are found to be major motives when buying organic in "western" societies (Schöberl, 2013), so one purpose of this research would be to find out whether or not this is fair to say for Chinese consumer, too. Further some scientist suggest (Yin S Wu L, 2010) that Chinese consumer believe organic food to taste better and is considered healthier compared to conventional food. As reasons why consumer refuse to buy organic food the same researcher



believes that “too expensive” is found very important besides they found that the knowledge about “organic” is very little (Yin S Wu L, 2010) among typical Chinese consumer. Contrary to Yin et al study, other researcher found (Jørgensen, 2012) out that Chinese consumer are willing to pay more than 30% more for organic T-shirts than for conventional clothing. Clearly there is a gap here in understanding whether and to what extent price impacts the behaviour of Chinese consumer.

This study is meant to deepen the understanding about what motivates Chinese to buy organic and at the same time find out if pricing plays really a major role when making the purchase decision.

METHOD AND MATERIALS

Scales being used

In order to gain understanding about the Chinese middle class’s attitude and motivation to buy or not to buy organic and to see if ethical concern play a role after all, a questionnaire was developed containing 15 questions (see appendix).

The starting point was a work by Finish researcher, who took Steptoe’s food choice questionnaire (ANDREW STEPTOE and TESSA M. POLLARD, 1995) and added new questionnaire items, as they feel that pheromones like the growing amount of vegetarians require also to reflect animal welfare and ecological factors in that questionnaire (Lindeman M, 2000).

Additional items

In addition to that scales developed by Lindeman and Vääänänen the questionnaire of this study includes some agree/disagree items, that might be cognitively demanding on the one hand, on the other hand they might be handy trying to close the “behavioural-intention” gap (Jo d’Ardenne, 2011), as for example one question asked whether or not the subject bought organic (imported and domestic) food before.

The underlying theory of the literature mentioned above is the Theory of planned behaviour (TPB), which was postulated by Ajzen (Ajzen, 1985). For an overview the reader might turn to the appendix.

Following Hypothesis will be checked:

H1 Perceived price is more important than environmental concern

H2 Health concern is most important as motivator to buy organic

H3 To pay 30% more for certified organic food is not acceptable



H4 Sex impacts ethical concerns regarding treatment of animals

H5 Higher income results in higher rate in organic consumption

H6 Imported organic food is perceived more trustworthy than domestically grown organic products

H7 The taste of organic food is perceived superior to conventional food

H8 Customers can link better environment with organically farmed products

In this study the attitude (ethical concerns regarding animal rights or environmental issues) intention as well as the actual behaviour (“buy organic”) are being observed.

The questionnaire was translated making use of a back translation process to make sure that the semantic meaning was correctly translated from English to Chinese, the result was then verified by a Chinese native researcher (Brislin, 1970).

Population and Sample Size

According to the literature, it is fair to assume that it is mostly the white-collar Chinese middle class that opts for organic food. According to a McKinsey study (Dominic Barton, 2013) out of 256 Mio urban Chinese households 54 % can be considered “mass middle class”. So the population would be 138Mio households, at a 95% confidence level with a confidence interval of 5 a sample size of 384 would be representative.

The questionnaire was distributed via “Wechat” groups, the software used to collect the data (“Sojump”) allowed to understand also where the respondents resident (in case they didn’t use VPN). The two largest clusters of respondents are to be found in Liaoning (the Northeast of China) and Guangdong (located in the Southwest of China), besides there was a considerable amount of residents from Beijing, Jiangsu and Shanghai area.

457 samples were collected so the findings might be considered representative.

Data analysis

Table 1: Reliability analysis

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.687	15

a. Cronbach's Alpha=0.687>0.6, we can accept this questionnaire and think it is credible.



Table 2: Factor analysis

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.722
	Approx. Chi-Square	1245.093
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Df	45
	Sig.	.000

b. Firstly, we measured the reliability and effectiveness of Research tools by exploratory factor analysis; the result (KMO=0.722>0.7, Sig=0.000<0.05) showed that Scale structure is effective and suitable for factor analysis.

Component	Total Variance Explained								
	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared			Rotation Sums of Squared		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.122	31.224	31.224	3.122	31.224	31.224	2.467	24.668	24.668
2	1.447	14.471	45.695	1.447	14.471	45.695	1.941	19.409	44.077
3	1.314	13.141	58.836	1.314	13.141	58.836	1.394	13.936	58.013
4	1.200	11.997	70.832	1.200	11.997	70.832	1.282	12.819	70.832
5	.701	7.007	77.839						
6	.640	6.399	84.238						
7	.521	5.205	89.443						
8	.472	4.717	94.161						
9	.357	3.567	97.727						
10	.227	2.273	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

c. Four factors can represent about 70% samples.



Rotated Component Matrix ^a				
	Component			
	1	2	3	4
The food I eat has been produced in a way that animals have not experienced pain.	.180	.902	-.012	.014
The food I eat has been prepared in an environmental friendly way.	.645	.401	-.016	.112
The food I eat has been produced in a way that animals' right have been respected.	.178	.905	-.052	.058
The food I eat is of certified organic origin.	.715	.271	-.143	.120
The food I eat is value for money.	.811	.076	.093	-.010
The food I eat is healthy for me and contain no chemicals that might harm my health.	.876	-.006	-.065	.001
Do you think conventional food (is not organic) is safe and good enough for me to eat ?	.176	-.108	-.206	.803
Do you think food items bought in big supermarkets are safe ?	-.051	.208	.251	.767
Do you think to pay more for healthier food is a good option ?	-.112	.041	.787	.104
Are you willing to pay 30% more for organic food if its 100% certified/trustworthy organic ?	.058	-.106	.795	-.084

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

d. Cluster and Rename

Component 1- Environmental concern

Component 2- Animals concern

Component 3- Price concern

Component 4- Healthy concern

RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the survey. Each hypothesis (1-8) will be shown with the descriptive statistics being used in that particular case

8 Hypotheses:

1) H1

Descriptive Statistics						
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Environmental concern	457	1	4	1639	3.44	.785
Price concern	457	1	4	1559	3.41	.773



e.1639>1559,3.44>3.41. The score of environmental food are higher than the price of food; it means that concern for environmental food has taken priority over the price of the food.

2) H2

Descriptive Statistics						
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Animals concern	457	1	4	1242	2.72	.924
Environmental concern	457	1	4	1573	3.44	.785
Healthy concern	457	1	4	1628	3.56	.810
Price concern	457	1	4	1559	3.41	.773

f. The score of healthy concern is the highest, so that healthy concern is most important.

3) H3

Do you think to pay more for healthier food is a good option? * Are you willing to pay 30% more for organic food if its 100% certified/trustworthy organic? Crosstabulation					
			Are you willing to pay 30% more for organic food if its 100% certified/trustworthy organic?		Total
			YES	NO	
Do you think to pay more for healthier food is a good option?	YES	Count	241	60	301
		% Within Do you think to pay more for healthier food is a good option?	80.1%	19.9%	100.0%
		% Within Are you willing to pay 30% more for organic food if its 100% certified/trustworthy organic?	75.5%	43.5%	65.9%
	NO	Count	78	78	156
		% Within Do you think to pay more for healthier food is a good option?	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
		% Within Are you willing to pay 30% more for organic food if its 100% certified/trustworthy organic ?	24.5%	56.5%	34.1%
Total	Count	319	138	457	
	% Within Do you think to pay more for healthier food is a good option?	69.8%	30.2%	100.0%	
	% Within Are you willing to pay 30% more for organic food if its 100% certified/trustworthy organic?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	



Each subscript letter denotes a subset of Are you willing to pay 30% more for organic food if its 100% certified/trustworthy organic? Categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

g. 65.9% people want to pay more for healthier food. Among the people who are willing to pay more money for healthier food, more than 80% of them are willing to pay 30% more. So, pay 30% more for certified organic food is acceptable.

4) H4

Partial correlation

Control Variables		Animals concern	
Highest education & Live in the capital of province & Income	Sex	Correlation	.163
		Significance (2-tailed)	.000
		df	452

h. Sig=0.000,0.000<0.05. Correlation is significant. Male and female have significant differences on the treatment of animals.

Crosstab

		Animals concern				Total	
		not important at all	Less important	a bit important	very important		
Sex	male	Count	29	64	67	32	192
		% within Sex	15.1%	33.3%	34.9%	16.7%	100.0%
	female	Count	18	79	94	75	265
		% within Sex	6.8%	29.8%	35.5%	28.3%	100.0%

i. Compared to male, female are more concerned about animals' health. The proportion of thinking it is very important more than male and think it is not important at all less than male. H4 ctd

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Correlations		
	B	Std. Error				Beta	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Zero-order	Partial
1	Constant	-.457	.155	-2.938	.003	-.762	-.151			
	Sex	.289	.094	.143	3.078	.002	.104	.474	.143	.143

a. Dependent Variable: Animals

j: Sig=0.003,0.002<0.05. Regression is significant.

$$Y = -0.457 + 0.289X$$

Men and women have significant differences on the treatment of animals. Especially, women are more focused on animals



5) H5

Control Variables		Do you have bought imported organic products?	
Highest education & Live in the capital of province & Sex	Income	Correlation Significance (2-tailed)	-.183 .000
		Df	452

k. Sig=0.000,0.000<0.05. Correlation is significant. Income and imported organic consumption have significant differences.

		Do you have bought imported organic products ?		Total	
		YES	NO		
Income	8000 or lower	Count	197	339	
		% within Income	58.1%	41.9%	100.0%
	8001-15000	Count	59	18	77
		% within Income	76.6%	23.4%	100.0%
	15000 or higher	Count	34	7	41
		% within Income	82.9%	17.1%	100.0%

l: The people whose income lower than 8000RMB, 58.1% of them have bought organic food. The people whose income higher than 15000, 82.9% of them have bought organic food. Higher income results in higher rate in organic consumption.

6) H6

Partial Correlations

Control Variables		Do you have bought imported organic products?	
Sex & Highest education & Live in the capital of province & Income	Do you have bought organic products made in China?	Correlation Significance (2-tailed)	.277 .000
		df	451

m: Sig=0.000,0.000<0.05. Correlation is significant. The consumption of domestically organic and imported organic has significant differences.

		Do you have bought imported organic products?		Total	
		YES	NO		
Do you have bought organic products made in China?	YES	Count	235	326	
		% of Total	51.4%	19.9%	71.3%
	NO	Count	55	76	131
		% of Total	12.0%	16.6%	28.7%
Total	Count	290	167	457	
	% of Total	63.5%	36.5%	100.0%	



n: The rate of both have been bought is 51.4%, only have bought imported organic food is 12%, only have bought domestically organic food is 19.9%. People prefer domestically grown organic products than imported organic food.

7) H7

Do you think organic food tastes better than conventional food?

		Frequency	Valid percent
Valid	YES	130	28.4
	NO	327	71.6
	Total	457	100.0

o. The taste of organic food is perceived inferior to conventional food.

8) H8

Do you think organic food is better for our environment?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	YES	378	82.7
	NO	79	17.3
	Total	457	100.0

p. 82.7% people think organic food is better for our environment.

Correlations

		Environmental concern
Do you think organic food is better for our environment?	Pearson Correlation	-.084
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.073
	Covariance	-.032

q. Sig=0.073>0.05.Organic food and an environmental way has no significant impact.It means Chinese customers' impression of the organic food awareness is fuzzy.Customers can not link better environment with organically farmed products.

DISCUSSION

This poll showed, that the perceived price is less important than for the food choice than environmental concern (H1), other research however (Schöberl, 2013) shows that both motives might be almost equally strong when it comes to the actual behaviour. Somehow not as a surprise is the H2 (health concern) was measured positive, from other markets and research (Groier & Schermer, 2005) this seems to me a common result without any intercultural impact. Price however is still seen –for some consumer- as barrier, not only according to this study but also from more matured organic markets like the UK (Foster & Padel, 2005).

H3 (willingness to pay 30%) came as a surprise as 65% of the samples expressed their willingness to pay actually more, while out of that group 80% said they would even pay 30% more than for conventional food. As from the poll it is known that the respondents really opt



for green food, so there is no big intention / actual behaviour gap in the finding. This results contradict some research (Yin S Wu L, 2010), who suggest that consumer in China perceive organic food as “too expensive” and even suggest to lower price to achieve a higher market penetration. This study with the given data would even allow marketers to increase prices if at the same the consumer would be better educated about the organic idea and its ethical implication.

Hypothesis 4 was meant to find out whether sex impacts ethical concern on animal welfare as well as on environmental preservation / protection. Steptoe et al (ANDREW STEPTOE and TESSA M. POLLARD, 1995) already stated that women have higher concern for ethical problems when it comes to food choice. This impact of sex seems to be universal despite any cultural / religious differences.

H5 made clear that a higher income converts into higher likelihood to buy organic, this is inline with other research (ITC, 2011) that also suggest that social status of the people as well as “face saving” concerns (“mianzi”) plays little role when making the actual buying decision. The poll also failed to find any preference for imported organic food (H&M), Chinese consumer do not seem to care about the origin that much. This finding might be surprising in face of all recent food scandals (milk powder, or faked eggs etc.) but is again inline with other research (ITC, 2011). Stern suggest (Stern, 2005) that especially the social context might have a big impact on individual behaviour. In that sense consumption of organic food might be curbed by making use of strong social contexts that have their origin in the strong collectivist culture of China.

The answers regarding H7 (organic food tastes better than conventional food) brought some interesting results, as the majority of respondents felt that the organic in fact tastes inferior to conventional food. Foster et al (Foster & Padel, 2005) found in their research that consumers need to feel a reason to justify the relative higher price for organic. If so “reason” can’t be the taste but purely health and environmental motives.

This result comes as a surprise, as in other markets (for example Austria) consumer appreciate the “better taste” and mark the superior taste as one of the main driving forces to opt for organic (Groier & Schermer, 2005).

The final hypothesis 8 shows that the consumers fail to link organically farmed food with a better environment. This findings are in line with other research (Xianbing Liu, 2012) that suggest that “values need to be developed..” before consumers realise their actual impact through shopping decisions.

FUTURE RESEARCH / LIMITS OF THIS RESEARCH

This study did not collect more data that would reveal impact of “social norm” and its consequences on the TPB. While some research suggest that there is little impact on the actual buying behaviour (ITC, 2011), it is fair to doubt that in a collectivistic society like China, social



norm and social expectation plays such little to no role. Further research would be helpful. Collectivism is based on group behaviour regulation and face saving (Hofstede, 1980). In other markets like Korea collectivism linked to the Confucian education / value / believe system has been studied (Yoon-Na Cho, 2013) but in for China the impact of that collectivistic belief system in changing / developing green shopping behaviours has not yet been conducted.

During the research design process, it became clear that some concepts like “value for money” or animal rights at large are hard to translate / understand for Chinese. It would be interesting to divert more attention to that point. Januszewska et al (Renata Januszewska, 2011) stressed out the need to take cultural difference into consideration, when applying food questionnaires (that were developed in the “western” world) to another cultural context.

It has become clear that trust and general understanding in the concept of organic food needs further education / development. This process will take time, as even in matured European markets consumers remain confused and lack understanding (Groier & Schermer, 2005).

Another question that needs further investigation would be whether like in other markets (Austria for example) a closer contact to the producer of organic food (Groier & Schermer, 2005) would enhance / deepen the trust in organic food and thus impact the food choice.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper aims at finding whether ethical concerns play a role in the process of buying food in China. The results from the survey show strong evidence that there is a sense of buying behaviour impacts the environment. While “environment” seems to be on the agenda of Chinese consumers, the reading for animal welfare / concern for animal rights are very low. Overall -as suggested in previous research- there is a big opportunity in developing a buying behaviour that might positively impact in a more environmental friendly consuming pattern. The research also shows that Chinese are ready and willing to pay a premium for organic food, at the same time it becomes clear that trust in certification is not very high and needs to be deepened if marketer want to pursue a skimming price strategy.

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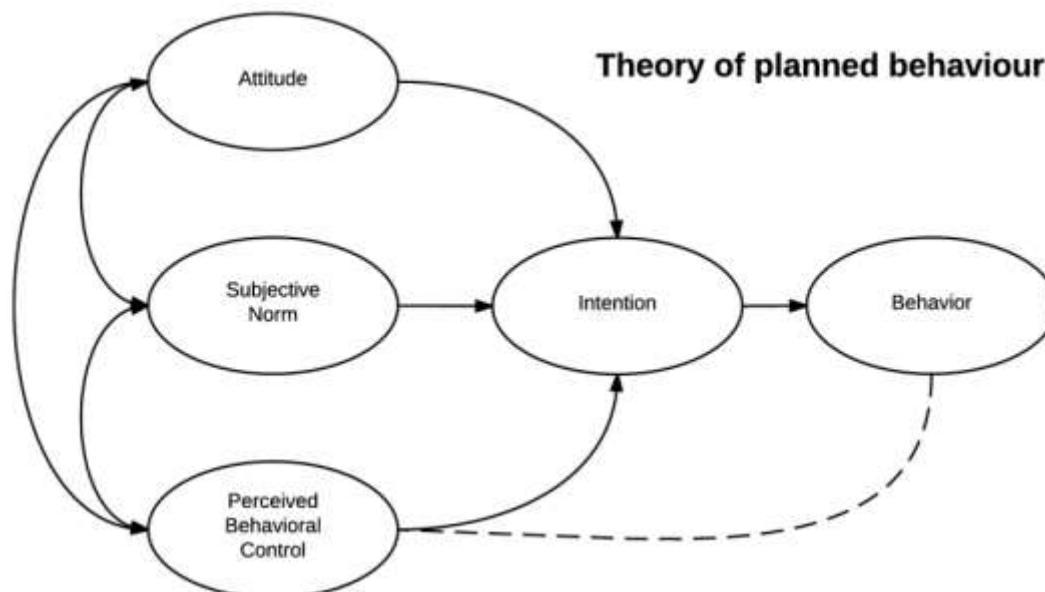
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APENDIX



Drawn by Robert Orzanna, see: <https://orzanna.de/>



Questionnaire

Please indicate sex male female

Your highest education bachelor master or higher

Do you live in the capitol of your province? yes no

It is important to me that the food I eat on a typical day:

1=not important at all and 4 = very important

- 1 Has been produced in a way that animals have not experienced pain
- 2 Has been prepared in an enviromental friendly way
- 3 Has been produced in a way that animals' right have been respected
- 4 Is of certified organic origin
- 5 Is value for money
- 6 Is healthy for me and contain no chemicals that might harm my health

Do you think yes / no

- 7 Organic food is overpriced
- 8 Organic food is better for our enviroment
- 9 Conventional food (ie not organic) is safe and good enough for me to eat
- 10 Food items bought in big supermarkets are safe
- 12 To pay more for healthier food is a good option
- 13 I am willing to pay 30% more for organic food if its 100% certified/trustworthy organic
- 14 Food items bought in our local small market are of better quality and better value for money than bought in a big supermarket
- 16 I have bought organic chinese products
- 17 I have bought imported organic products
- 18 Organic food tastes better than conventional food