

Does Cultural Omnivorousness Exist In the Chinese Context? --- Distinction Through Taste In Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the consumption patterns of popular culture and distinction practices in the Chinese context on the basis of Bourdieusian theory of distinction, the omnivore debate and studies on cultural globalization. 10 in-depth interviews were conducted by targeting Chinese young metropolitans who are in favor of Western popular culture. How do they employ the sense of distinction in cultural consumption and how do their socio-economic attributes function in shaping their taste and sense of distinction are the main focuses of this study. Whether they are cultural omnivores will also be investigated. As Western popular culture has dominated the Chinese market and threatened the domestic cultural products, it is necessary to investigate its consumers' perspectives and consumption behaviours. Results suggest that the Chinese youngsters who are in favor of Western popular culture also have a broad cultural preference which can be defined as 'omnivorous'. Through consuming the Western popular culture, they tend to place themselves on a higher status over the Chinese popular culture lovers by aesthetically judging on the domestic cultural products and its consumers. It can be seen that the youngsters are highly shaped by the Western universal values, as they display the political disposition of individualism, liberalism, pluralism, which also resulted in conflicts with the Chinese traditional values and norms. As well as that the formation of their openness and democratic advocacy are attributed to the changing economics, culture and politics in China in the past few decades. Moreover, findings show that distinction also exists within Western popular culture consumption, while respondents also drew boundaries by means of 'what' to consume and 'how' to consume. Genres and consumption styles of the Western popular cultural objects are ordered hierarchically as well. Lastly, regarding the young omnivores' socio-economic background, cultural capital does play a key part in determining one's taste in art and cultural consumption, however, family's economic capital works as the foundation in this process of accumulating children's cultural capital, especially the cosmopolitan cultural capital. Other factors such as the city of residence and profession also matter.

KEYWORDS: distinction, symbolic boundaries, cultural omnivores, popular culture, cultural globalization

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, Western popular culture has gained popularity among various social groups in the Chinese market. Imported Western popular culture such as Hollywood films, pop music, musical, TV programmes, and high street fashion has a great impact on Chinese people's cultural taste, aesthetic disposition, behavior, values and beliefs and it has changed the cultural consumption patterns of Chinese people, especially educated youngsters from urban (upper) middle class (Gao, 2016). Recently, there are a lot of debates on Chinese domestic popular culture. Many people complain that compared to ten years ago, the quality of Chinese music, TV drama and film production has decreased dramatically due to the phenomenon of the fan economy (Liang & Shen, 2016), which refers to a new business operation model in Chinese media and entertainment industry. How successful a pop star is depends on how many fans he or she has, but not the quality of his or her works matters primarily. Therefore, with a good appearance and a huge fan base, the young pop stars does not need to put too much effort into improving their artistic skills but can still gain massive attention and popularity (China Daily, 2018). So currently, many leading Chinese entertainment companies focus on making pop idols to achieve huge revenue and this trend has received resistant voices. On Weibo (China's biggest Microblogging platform), it is very common to see that a group of users disdain and reject this kind of superficial fan culture, and some of them have switched to consuming Western popular culture forms instead, such as Western pop music, TV dramas and films, to show their distinctive identities. As Chen (2017) illustrated, American drama fans are mostly well-educated and open to the liberalization trend. It is therefore that, in the underlying research, I will target those Western popular culture lovers and to investigate their sense of distinction, why do they have such a taste and how do they draw symbolic boundaries by means of their taste in popular culture consumption.

In recent years, Bourdieu's theory of cultural distinction has received many critiques and there are growing debates in the changing nature of cultural capital, cultural omnivorousness and new forms of cultural distinction (see for overviews: Friedman, Savage, Hanquinet, & Miles, 2015; Prieur & Savage, 2013; van Eijk & Knulst, 2005; Michael, 2017). Researches show that the power of traditional cultural capital has been gradually decreased due to the popularization of higher education, and the distinction between highbrow snob and lowbrow slob thus suggested to be replaced by omnivores and univores (Peterson, 1992). Therefore, to define one's cultural taste, high culture cannot be the only measurement, broader cultural forms should be taken into consideration as well, including popular culture, and folk culture. Sociologists also criticized that

Bourdieu's theory is very French (Lamont, 1992; Alexander, 2003), which might not be perfectly applied to other countries. In China, currently there are only a few researches studying the sense of cultural distinction in the Chinese context (Lu, 2017; Ma, 2015; Xue & Yu, 2017), however no empirical studies have been able to prove that cultural omnivores exist in China, and no studies into researching the symbolic boundaries between consuming Western popular culture and Chinese domestic popular culture to my knowledge exist as well. With Western popular culture becoming one of the dominant consumption trends in China, this research will offer some academic insights to help people to understand those Western popular cultural consumers' perception from a sociological perspective, as well as provide practical suggestions to Chinese entertainment industries to better understand the audiences' needs.

Therefore, the research question will be as follows: *How do Chinese metropolitan youngsters, who are in favor of Western popular culture, distinguish themselves from other consumers by means of their taste?* The sub-questions will be: Why are some Chinese youngsters specifically into Western popular culture? To what extent do their socio-economic backgrounds influence their taste and their sense of distinction? The Western popular cultures here specifically refers to the contemporary popular music, films and TV dramas that origin from the West, and have been widely distributed around the world. This research targeted Chinese young metropolitans who resident in Chinese first-tier or new first-tier cities, including two special administrative regions: Hong Kong and Macaw. According to ChinaDaily (2017), in China, the only four first-tier cities are Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. 15 cities including Hangzhou, Nanjing, Chongqing, Xi'an etc. are ranked as new first-tier cities based on five indicators: city's pivotability, the concentration of commercial resources, variety of lifestyle, citizen vitality and flexibility in the future. Thus, cities in different tiers also reflect differences in income level, infrastructures, consumer behaviour and consumer sophistication. Compared with lower-tier cities people, residents inhabit in big cities are more easily to get access to diverse cultural resources and will result in more diversified consumption patterns.

To investigate their sense of distinction, I used Bourdieu's theory of distinction as well as insights developed within the so-called omnivore debate as the backbone of my thesis, in order to explore those youngsters' consumption patterns, how they draw symbolic boundaries and how they define their taste in this process. In the meanwhile, their social background (educational backgrounds, occupation, parental influences and experiences of cultural participation) was measured as it provides information to understand to what extent these elements related to their taste cultivation and sense of cultural distinction. Moreover, this research also aims to find out whether the concept of cultural omnivores can be translated to the Chinese context, if the

youngsters can be defined as omnivores, then what are the main characteristics they have in common?

A qualitative research method, that is, the semi-structured interview (Bryman, 2012) was adopted in this research to collect data in terms of people's perception and meaning-making process in cultural consumption. Data were analyzed thematically with the help of Atlas.ti and will be presented following the main themes in a logical order. This thesis consists of three main parts: chapter two provides an overview of previous studies on Bourdieusian theories of taste and distinction, the omnivore debates and cultural globalization. Chapter three illustrates how this study was conducted, including introducing the research method, operationalization process, sampling strategy, and data analysis. Chapter four presents the research findings. Three main themes were developed based on the research questions, theoretical framework and research objectives: boundary drawing with other consumers, distinction within Western popular cultural consumption, and Chinese cultural omnivores. In the end, a conclusion will be given to summarize this study, as well as giving suggestions and scopes for further research.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1 Taste and Distinction in Cultural Consumption

2.1.1 Frankfurt School and the Mass Culture

In European societies, cultural forms are ranked hierarchically by its universal value. For Arnold, art only refers to the fine arts, which includes social, moral and beneficial character with uplifting effects to the society (Arnold, 1869). With the development of capitalist production in arts and culture in the twentieth century, the mass culture emerged. The Frankfurt School scholars developed a trans-disciplinary and critical approach in cultural and communication studies to investigate the social effects of mass culture. They were the first group of scholars that studied the influences of the culture industry in the contemporary world, and related the mass culture with political, economic, cultural and social aspects (Kellner, 2005). Horkheimer and Adorno (1947) claimed that mass culture is a commodity produced by mass production techniques. The cultural industry was controlled by capitalists and social elites to consolidate power relations through cultural goods, and therefore to legitimate social inequality. They concluded the characteristics of mass culture as homogenous, standardized and predictable, avoidance of effort, and immediate satisfaction. Indeed, mass culture is easy to digest and discourage critical thinking. As it not allowed people to think about the bad reality and against the power of economics and politics, mass culture is an instrument of *hegemony* (Gramsci, 1971) to some degree.

Nevertheless, there are many critics towards the theory of cultural industry (Schor, 2007; Paddison, 1982). For example, firstly, the Frankfurt School viewed consumers as manipulated and passive, but ignored the fact that they can be active in cultural consumption as well. Secondly, their critiques on popular culture and taste were too elitist, while particular consumer choices were not discussed in term of high and low cultural forms. Thirdly, in Adorno's analysis of popular music (1941), he refers that popular music is standardized and commodified. But actually, serious music from the past also could not escape from the cultural industry (Alexander, 2003).

2.1.2 Cultural Distinction and Social Boundaries

Stereotypical theorizing suggest that social classes consume art differently, but in terms of what is consumed and in terms of the mode of consumption. Consuming highbrow cultures such as classical music and fine arts are deemed to be more superior and educated than lowbrow art consumption, including watching television and listening to popular music. Bourdieu (2010) introduced three forms of capital to explain the cultural preferences of different social groups and the distinctive system of dispositions, which are cultural capital, economic capital and social capital. Above all, cultural capital is a currency based on taste, which involves knowledge about

legitimate art and culture that can exist in three different forms: in the “embodied state”, “objectified state” and “institutionalized state” (Bourdieu, 2002). One powerful principle of cultural capital is that it can be transmitted, such as in a family. Therefore, the accumulation of cultural capital will lead to the reproduction of class distinction intergenerationally in the socialization process. To neutralize this reproduction strategy, one way is to achieve the academic qualification that is legally guaranteed. Bourdieu also related cultural capital with the concept of *habitus*, which can be explained as the individual’s current class position that determines his or her ways of thinking, habits or worldview (Bourdieu, 2010). He showed that people from different social classes have different levels of artistic knowledge and they talk about art in different ways. Thus, taste and social position are closely connected. High-class elites are able to use cultural capital to maintain their social status and draw symbolic boundaries to make distinctions with lower classes, as well as with the economic elite, by means of their taste (Alexander, 2003).

Lamont and Molnar (2002) argued that social actors make symbolic boundaries as conceptual distinctions to categorize people, practices, and objects and thus to generate feelings of similarity and group membership. Their studies on boundary-work presented various configurations of social and symbolic boundaries. Unequal access and distribution of social opportunities and resources (both material and non-material) are the main reasons that lead to social differences and thus social boundaries. By consuming specific cultural products, people develop a stronger sense of belonging to their class positions (Lamont and Lareau, 1988).

Traditionally, high art was differentiated from two lower cultural forms, that is, popular art and folk art, since it is richer and more complex, requires knowledge and intellectual understanding of the audiences. However, Dimaggio (1987) claimed that “genre distinctions are created, ritualized, and eroded, and processes by which tastes are produced as part of the sense-making and boundary-defining activities of social groups”. He refers to the *Artistic Classification System* (ACS) as “a system of relations among genres and among their producers in a given society” (p. 441), which means that the classification system varies in different societies and subgroups.

2.1.3 Distinction in Other Cultural Context

Applying Bourdieu’s theory of taste in a global context, Kane (2003) concluded that young elites from different world regions (Europe, Asia and North America) participate in cultural events at different rates. For example, European students are more likely to attend legitimated cultural activities such as visiting museums and going to classical musical concerts, and they are more

likely to use traditional high culture to draw symbolic boundaries with other groups. In the United States, DiMaggio and Mukhtar (2004) found that there was a significant decline in high art participation rates, especially among younger groups, which implies that high culture seems to have lost its central position in forming cultural capital.

According to Li (2010), in China, the gap between classes is strongly associated with economic resources. Since China has the biggest amount of middle-class members in the world, the middle class has great influences in shaping the economic, social and political changes in the nation. Chinese middle class is divided into three major groups: old middle-class (traditional self-employed people), new middle-class (private entrepreneurs, enterprise manager, professionals and intellectuals, government officials) and marginal middle class (workers in service sectors and low level clerical jobs) (Morreale, Shostya & Villada, 2018). Scholars measure the size of middle class based on different criteria such as “having a high and stable income, engaging in professional or managerial occupations, having a high level of education, and being able to maintain a comfortable standard of living and consumption” (Li, 2010; p. 18). Yet compared with the other two capitals (cultural capital and social capital) proposed by Bourdieu, economic capital plays a more leading role in Chinese social classification processes. Hence, with the economic foundation, Chinese middle-class families also tend to hold advantages in investing in their children’s education to foster their cultural capital (Li, 2010). Regarding the cultural consumption of the Chinese middle class, Liu’s research on consumption patterns of Chinese visitors in museums and galleries (2017) shows that the museum participation and visitor’s engagement level are not only related to educational level, parental influences, occupation and gender, but also strongly associated with their economic profiles. Moreover, Hong and Zhao (2015) also found that the Chinese middle class shows little class distinctiveness in terms of taste and habitus since family income is the primary influence factor to increase children’s cultural participation.

1.2 The Omnivore Debate and New Forms of Distinction

1.3 2.2.1 The Omnivorousness Studies

Nowadays, with the democratization of high education, the power of elite taste has decreased, as cultural capital does not only connect with high culture anymore. Bourdieu’s theory of distinction has received many critics as well (Lamont, 1992; Peterson and Simkus, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996). For instance, firstly, social changes and social development in the post-modern age will lead to more complex patterns in cultural distinction in different societies. Secondly, Bourdieu focused too extensively on social class but paid less attention to race, gender, and age. Thirdly,

contemporary privileged (upper) middle-class tend to engage not only in classical fine arts, but also in all distinctive leisure activities to show their preeminent abilities in the appreciation of various cultural forms. Peterson (1992) defined this group of people as cultural *omnivores*. His research shows that in contrary to the traditional elite/mass model of cultural taste, high status people tend to become cultural omnivores who are more democratic and open in their taste. This suggests that the distinction between highbrow snob and lowbrow slob has to be replaced by cultural omnivores and univores. Prieur and Savage (2013) participated in two researches in Europe to investigate the changing nature of cultural capital. Results show that in some European countries, many highly educated groups reject the traditional cultural boundaries and there is a tendency of anti-elitism or egalitarianism. People opt to enjoy various forms of cultural activities rather than consuming traditional high culture to gain prestige. Other researchers have generated similar patterns worldwide (see e.g., Dimaggio and Mukhtar, 2004; van Eijk and Knulst, 2005; Sintas and Alvarez, 2002; Emersion, 2003).

Moreover, studies also suggest that taste is closely related to people's socio-professional attributes (Bellavance, 2016). Since there is a link between occupation and cultural worlds, Peterson and Simkus (1992) identified three groups of people in the US in terms of their socio-professional backgrounds: *higher managerial*, *higher technical* and *higher cultural*. With regard to their participation in arts and leisure activities, the higher managerial group seems to have a more popular and conservative taste and have less contact with the art worlds and as a result display a less cultivated and informed taste, even if they have higher education and social status. The higher technical group includes the social science and humanities sector, which with the preference of a more classical taste rather than a popular taste, and their cultural consumption in daily life is more serious. Their cultural practices are basically determined by their professional relation to culture and therefore they normally follow the trends in their areas of expertise. Thus a well-cultivated and informed taste will be generated spontaneously. Furthermore, Michael (2017) found that cultural capital loses its currency among young business elites. Those well educated, (upper) middle-class young talents showed their open-mindedness towards different cultural forms and genres. Cultural consumption is not a necessary topic in their daily conversation while knowledge about art is more like an instrument to build social connections (gain social capital), which is important for self-promotion and career advancement.

Omnivorousness studies also imply that people's tastes and attitudes in cultural consumption are tied to their political dispositions. Cultural omnivores tend to apply a liberal, anti-authoritarianism, multicultural tolerance, and broad humanism value system in aesthetic choices (Fishman and Lizardo, 2013; Bryson, 1996; van Poecke, 2017). However,

omnivorousness as a phenomenon has its own path dependencies in different national contexts, which means that the omnivorous taste is embedded in a nation's historical and cultural pathways. Since institutional influences haven't drawn much attention by the sociologists, Fishman and Lizardo (2013) studied the differences in people's cultural choices in the two close Iberian countries, Spain and Portugal, to investigate how political institutions affect the omnivore practices from a macro-historical perspective. They argued that "the two countries' dissimilar pathways to democracy generated a sharp difference in institutional practices within the school system and that this post-democratization divergence led to fundamentally different patterns of cultural consumption in the youth of the two countries" (p. 232). In school education, compared with Spanish schooling pedagogy, which is hierarchical and content-centred, Portuguese schools are more focused on capacity building, with a student-centred approach to cultivate student's aesthetic disposition by offering them opportunities to incorporate with various cultural experiences.

2.2.2 Emerging Capitals and New Forms of Distinction

However, the emergence of the cultural omnivores does not mean that cultural capital has lost its currency altogether. In recent years, "emerging cultural capital" (Prieur & Savage, 2013) has become a new form to express cultural distinction, especially amongst the well-educated youngsters. Friedman, et.al (2015) summarized some of the emerging cultural capital and how the new elites use these capitals to display their distinctive statuses. For example, the notion of *cosmopolitan cultural capital*, which refers to an "orientation of openness to foreign others and cultures" (Igarashi & Saito, 2014), has been observed in many nations, such as Denmark, Finland, Brazil, Switzerland, and Serbia (Bühlmann, David & Mach, 2012; Cvetičanin & Popescu, 2011; Prieur & Savage, 2013). To gain cosmopolitan cultural capital, it requires individuals to be able to speak foreign languages, be familiar with foreign countries and cultures, travel a lot and be able to exchange and communicate with foreigners.

Originally, cosmopolitanism was not meant to be promoted by the modern education system, as the education system mainly served as a state apparatus for nation building. However, recent investigations have demonstrated that due to the neoliberalism transition, education systems have shifted the focus from national economic development to the global economy. To be able to gain powerful competitiveness in the global competition, cosmopolitan cultural capital therefore has become more and more crucial now. Chen and Barnett (2000) illustrated that in some non-European countries such as China, South Korea and India, pursuing university degrees in the West has become a trend to be cosmopolitanism. This kind of oversea experiences will offer them

more opportunities in the job market. Moreover, in researching the Chinese lifestyle magazine industry, Li (2012) discovered that elites from Chinese (upper) middle-classes were eager to pursue a “Western lifestyle” to present their self-identity” and reading cosmopolitan lifestyle magazines could help them gain global orientation. How do they deploy the sense of distinction through displaying their amount of cosmopolitan cultural capital will also be one of the topics that need to be investigated in the underlying research.

2.2.3 From “What” to “How”

Researches also show that omnivores are not really tolerant and democratic to all kinds of cultural forms, the way they span cultural boundaries has predominantly switched from “what” to consume to “how” to consume (McCoy and Scarborough, 2014; van Poecke, 2017; Bryson, 1996; Daenekindt & Roose, 2014). The way they decode the meaning of cultural products varies according to their social background. Reception approaches suggest that “audiences are the key to understand art, because the meanings created from art and the ways it is used depend on its consumers, not its creators” (Alexander, 2003; p, 181). Therefore, unlike the Frankfurt School scholars, who claimed that audiences are passively accepting everything distributed by the cultural industries, audiences can actively take their own meaning in interpretation as well (Radway, 1984). Based on the “active audience” approach, McCoy and Scarborough (2014) did an interesting research on “trashy” television consumption. Inspired by the Bourdieusian concept of “symbolic boundaries”, they identified how viewers employ a “camp sensibility”, which implies an “ironic consumption” mode beyond traditional Television watching, as they frame their viewing styles as “guilty pleasures”. The authors concluded, “Ironic consumption, a camp sensibility, and a guilty pleasure viewing style are themselves kinds of acquired cultural capital. They are a learned ability that is acquired through education and long exposure to a diverse set of cultural objects that allows the viewer to distinguish themselves from others” (p.55). This research shed a new light on how contemporary omnivores draw symbolic boundaries by means of their active viewing styles towards the mass culture.

Furthermore, Goldberg et al. (2016) distinguish between two dimensions of cultural preferences: *variety* and *typicality*. Though this two-dimensional space, the audience position has been divided into four types: *mono-purist*, *mono-mixer*, *poly-mixer*, and *poly-purist*. *Poly-purists* refer to people who “like to sample broadly, but only within the confines of established categories. They enact multiple identities, but they are averse to defying cultural codes” (p. 219). Especially, the type of omnivores who tend to cherry-pick within a broad variety of genres that are considered to be more ‘authentic’ and ‘sophisticated’, rather than *across* genres, are the so-called

poly-purists. They argue that rather than boundary erosion, poly-purists seek for genre protection to make their consumption taste socially meaningful because they have the ability to appreciate and be familiar with various genre codes which is acquired from education and experiences (Goldberg et al., 2016). They legitimize their taste through transposing the ‘pure gaze’ (Bourdieu, 1993) or aesthetic disposition to different forms of culture. Poly-purists also display their refined taste by rejecting things that convey commercialism and populism, and interestingly, their choices on cuisine as well as their political preferences are strongly associated with their attitudes in consumption selection (van Poecke, 2017; Goldberg et al., 2016). These studies demonstrated that the way omnivores draw symbolic boundaries around items of mass culture has switched its emphasis from “what” to “how” in cultural consumption.

1.4 Globalisation and the Flow of Western Popular Culture

1.4.1 Development of Chinese Cultural Industries

Across the globe, cultural industries have different definitions. According to Yang (2011), in contemporary China, cultural industries can be categorized as an economic sector with a special focus on making a profit, which includes three parts: the core part (radio, TV and film, art services, news services, publishing and copyright services), the periphery part (leisure and entertainment services, Internet services, other cultural services) and the related part (cultural products and equipment, sale of products and equipment). Historically, during the early years of the establishment of new China since 1949, culture was served as propaganda that involves the distribution of a particular (socialist) governmental ideology. At that time, cultural resources such as TV, radio, and film have functioned as public services that were owned and operated by the state-owned institutions. Thus, costs and profits were less considered in the production processes because the government paid for everything. After two decades in the late 1970s, the economic reform under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping opened up the policy towards economic reconstruction and modernization. As the state control on culture was gradually loosening, more entertainment and aesthetic values had added to cultural products significantly (Yang, 2011; Shan, 2014; Cong & Li, 2011). To follow the policy of the market economy, the Chinese cultural industries also started to find ways to make profits from the market. Therefore, “culture serves politics” was replaced by “culture serves economy” (Shan, 2014, p. 116). In the 1990s, Chinese mainland government began to import popular culture such as pop music, TV dramas, and films from Hong Kong and Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and the US to fill people’s growing demands on cultural consumption (Gold, 1993; Wang, 2001; Su, 2011). Those imported cultural products had dramatically changed people’s understanding and perceptions on entertainment practices.

Entering the 21st century, the rapid development of media and communication technologies also have had a great impact on cultural industries worldwide. Under this circumstance, online entertainment emerged and people's consumption behaviours in regards to popular culture were transformed. Compared with the Western social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter) and digital TV portals (Netflix, HBO), Chinese online entertainment presents a more competitive landscape. Chinese biggest social media platforms (Wechat, Weibo) and digital TV platforms (Youku, iQiyi, Tencent) play the leading role in influencing Chinese cultural and entertainment industries (Cunningham & Craig, 2016). Nevertheless, even today, government intervention on cultural policy is still the main problem to limit the (economic and aesthetic) progress of the Chinese cultural industries. The conflicts between policy restriction and cultural creativity therefore cannot be solved easily by the government nor by cultural producers. This has directly led to the current situation that Chinese cultural industries are featured as low quality and lack of creativity (Shan, 2014).

1.4.2 Globalisation and Media Imperialism

In the field of international cultural studies, globalization has become a hot topic for many scholars. According to Alexander (2003), globalization refers to “the increasing interconnections among the nations of the world, growing world trade, the dissemination of cultural products and the sharing of cultural ideas, links among peoples of the world forged through international travel and through reciprocal communication media, and the rise of transnational organizations and multi-national corporations” (p. 57). In the process of globalisation, contemporary media technologies have connected the audiences worldwide and accelerated the flow of transnational images, especially the cultural image of the West. The theory of *media imperialism* (Kraidy, 2002) argues that when Western industrialized countries, especially the US, export their cultural products to the rest of the world, the global audiences will be heavily influenced by these media messages. Western popular culture such as TV programmes, Hollywood movies, and popular music are distributed worldwide which also leads to an unfortunate homogenization of the world's art forms.

The shaping approaches suggest that art has the power to shape society by putting ideas into people's minds (Alexander, 2003). This idea originates from a Marxism proposition that, as mentioned in the previous section, argues that cultural products have hegemonic symbolic power (Gramsci, 1971) which embodies universal values, norms, and world views. Crane (2014) discussed the phenomenon of American cultural imperialism and the debate in China over the decision to import Hollywood films. Different voices occur toward the policy of importing

Hollywood movies. One group (ordinary movie-goers and movie distributors) welcomes the competition from Hollywood while another (Chinese domestic filmmakers) is strongly against the Hollywood imports (Su, 2011). Many criticisms concerned the impact of American cultural values on Chinese audiences, and Hollywood is considered as the most successful exporter of ideology through promoting the American way of life. Zhou (2011) studied the consumption patterns of American TV programmes among Chinese college students and its impact on their knowledge, belief, value, behaviour and attitude. Results show that 80 per cent of American TV viewers are from the urban area while they tend to have a higher level of English proficiency, are relatively more open-minded, have more knowledge about the Western world and are affected by Western values. However, Gao (2016) argues that even if the Western popular culture has distributed widely in the Chinese market and has an impact on people's value system, only a small group of educated young elites with higher cosmopolitan cultural capital is engaging in those cultural products in a critical manner. In other words, they tend to decode the messages in a *negotiated position* (Hall, 1980). Certainly, the theory of cultural imperialism also has received many critics. Petras (1993) argues that cultural imperialism underestimates individual's free will and choice, as it ignores that interpretation of information processes work differently based upon people's own values and practices. Today, due to the globalization and international flow of cultural resources, two-way cultural exchange is possible rather than the imposition of a one-way flow of cultural values.

In sum, all of the above theories and findings are the basis to understand the respondents' attitudes towards Chinese cultural industries, as well as how Western cultural goods have influenced the Chinese domestic popular cultural products and have shaped Chinese youngsters' taste and value systems through the process of globalisation.

2. Methodology

3.1 Research Method

In order to understand the behaviours, perceptions, and meaning-making process of the Chinese metropolitan youngsters who are in favor of Western popular culture, and to see how they draw symbolic boundaries around the tastes and aesthetics of other consumers, a qualitative research method, more specifically, a semi-structured interview methods was adopted here. According to Bryman (2012), qualitative research is concerned with words rather than with numbers and its research strategy tends to be inductive, interpretive and constructionist. This is due to the fact that social reality is defined as constructed and social properties are the results of interactions between individuals. To understand this social reality, one needs to look at small cases/groups and their meaning-making process. Words of individuals contain motivations and emotions, show empathy, display symbols and other social aspects which might reflect their daily routines, experiences, behaviours and practices in various conditions in the setting of everyday life (Berg, 2002). Hence, to detect how individuals make sense of their world, in-depth analysis of the small groups, with a focus on finding what they have in common will be the best strategy. Bryman (2012) defines the semi-structured interview as “a context in which the interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview schedule but is able to vary the sequence of questions.” (p.212). This type of interview is structured by predetermined themes and special questions that are associated with research questions and theoretical concepts. Normally, an interview guide should be prepared in advance with outlined topics and questions. As a flexible interviewing method, the researcher normally follows an interview guide with outlined themes and questions, while adjusting the (sequence of) questions based on the responses.

3.2 Operationalization

The interview guide (see Appendix A) is structured by four main topics in terms of the research questions and theoretical concepts:

- 1). The *social background* of the interviewees, such as their age, city of residence, educational background, occupation, etc. This type of questions will be asked at the beginning, warm-up section of the interview when the interviewee introduces himself/herself. Knowing these information will help me to understand to what extent these factors may influence their cultural taste and their sense of distinction, as well as how cultural capital and economic capital function in this process.

- 2). The second topic refers to their *broad cultural preferences and consumption patterns*. This part aims to investigate whether they have a broad cultural taste and whether they are omnivores. Firstly, participants will give an overview of what they like and what they do not like generally in cultural consumption, and speak about several examples. Then, they have to define high art and folk art, and talk about their interest or disinterest in each form and specific genres.
- 3). The *function of Western popular culture in everyday life*. This section includes a deep investigation in consuming Western popular culture, especially with a focus on music, TV and film consumption (degree of preference, favourite forms/genres, favourite works and pop stars, event participation experiences, consumption behaviours), and how Western popular culture influences their social contacts, food preferences and political preferences.
- 4). *Sense of distinction*. Except for the Western popular culture, they will also talk about their views on Chinese popular culture; compare the differences between Chinese and Western popular culture from the angle of production, distribution and consumption; and summarize the characteristics of the two consumer groups: Chinese popular culture lovers and Western popular culture lovers. Certainly, in the previous sections, there might be some evidence showing their sense of distinction already.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

The strategy of sampling is purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012), so the units of analysis have to be more relevant to the research questions, which means that the participants have to be youngsters who live in Chinese first tier or new first-tier cities (including special administration areas) and show an interest in Western pop culture, especially in pop music, movies, and TV dramas. In this research, two methods were employed to approach the interviewees. One was finding them through personal connections. Selection criteria were posted on my WeChat (Chinese most-used chatting App with posting function), aimed to use social network connections to find the target participants. The second way was finding them in Sina Weibo (Chinese biggest Microblogging platform). I went to some popular Weibo accounts that mainly post news and updates about Western popular culture and Western pop stars, then I selected the newly published posts to write my comments: content included and introduction of myself as a researcher, the research topic and requirements for the target interviewee. Many Weibo users showed great interests and messaged me privately. Normally, users profile such as age, school, and the resident city can be found on their account pages, but in order to ensure that they all meet the requirements, I still asked some simple questions in advance to double confirm. Finally, 10 interviewees were found in total. Nine females and one male, age varies between 19 to 28 years

old, and they resident in seven different cities: Qingdao, Shanghai, Chongqing, Hangzhou, Xi'an, Beijing and Hong Kong (see the overview of the interviewee's basic information in Appendix B). One limitation here is the unbalance amount of male and female respondents, because there was only one male showed interest in participating this research.

Since I was not in China during the research period, all interviews were conducted in Chinese via WeChat audio call. The conversations were recorded and transcribed into Chinese as well, however, a brief English summary of each interview can be found in the attached files. The duration of interviews ranges from 50 minutes to 91 minutes, and recorded data reaches around 12 hours in all.

3.4 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was adopted here to turn data into relevant themes or categories. I basically followed three steps to analyze the interview transcripts as Bryman (2012) introduced: 1). Getting familiar with the data and generating initial codes. This is the first stage to start analyzing while the researcher has to read through the transcripts or field notes again and again, taking notes in the meanwhile and having a general idea of the preliminary codes. 2). Reviewing the codes and searching for themes. Codes identify the significant information in the collected data but themes are the result of active interpretation of the data into wider thematic categories, which can be related to research focus. 3). Refining the central themes and develop a framework to organize the segments of data which represent each theme correspondingly, then analyze the data in detail of what the interviewee says about each theme and what insights it may generate in terms of wider social norms and attitudes.

In the first round of initial coding, five main themes, 12 topics and 42 codes emerged. To narrow down the range and to structure the findings in a more logical way that connected with main theories and research questions, an Axial coding schema was developed (Appendix C). Five themes (including 18 codes) are derived from the collected data: 1). Consumption patterns of Western popular culture, 2). Distinction between Western and Chinese popular cultural consumption, 3). Distinction within Western popular cultural consumption, 4). Chinese omnivores. Atlas.ti was used in the analysis process for making the discursive patterns more clear and structured.

3.5 Reliability, Validity and Ethics

Regarding reliability and validity, Babbie (2014) states that field researchers normally give detailed illustrations instead of specifying concepts and this kind of comprehensive measurement

thus allows researchers to gain a deep meaning in concepts. To maintain a good research quality, it's necessary to stick to the theoretical framework and research questions by asking relevant questions in interviews. Hence, he argues that field researches provide measures with relatively higher validity. However, one of the potential problems of qualitative research is lack of reliability since the measurements are quite subjective. To establish higher reliability, personal biases which may influence the research findings will be taken into account, and researchers are required to adopt reflexivity to critically reflecting on their social background, values, beliefs, interest and experiences to think about how these factors may influence the research process and results (Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas & Caricativo, 2017). In this research, there are some topics related to the respondents' opinions toward the different social values and beliefs between China and the Western societies. As a person who has received both Chinese education and Western education (in the UK and the Netherlands) in the disciplines of arts and humanities, I probably have different views with some respondents in terms of for example, political dispositions and aesthetic judgements on cultural consumption. Therefore, I should take this into account and to be aware of not to interfere their arguments with my own proposition.

Before each interview started, the respondent was informed that the conversation would be recorded for transcribing, and their statements would be used as data for analyzing. Since the interviews were not carried out face to face, they were consent orally instead of signing the consent form. They knew that the conversation would be used only for academic purpose and would not be published as well as they were welcomed to keep up with the follow-up progress of this research. Moreover, the research process had no harm to the participants concerning physical and mental stress.

4. Results

Since this research focuses on investigating people's sense of distinction in cultural consumption, especially between the Western popular culture and Chinese popular culture, special attention has been paid to how respondents describe their cultural taste and emphasize their distinguishing characters. Findings are separated into three main parts: 1). *Boundary drawing with other consumers*. This part includes how they define Western popular culture and their broad consumption patterns (main forms and genres), their preferences, consumption styles and aesthetic judgements on Chinese popular culture, as well as their views toward Chinese popular culture lovers. Why the interviewees are specifically into Western popular culture and how do they span symbolic boundaries with other cultural items and (their) consumers will be answered here. 2). *Distinction within Western popular culture consumption*. Despite making distinctions with people who don't favor Western popular culture, results show that distinction also exists within this group, regarding 'what' to consume and 'how' to consume. 3). *Practices of Chinese cultural omnivores*. Through analyzing their preferences in high art and folk art, all the interviewees can be defined as cultural omnivores. Since the omnivorous practices are highly related to a nation's cultural and historical development, this sections also aims to explore how does the political, economic and cultural transformations shape different generations in political dispositions, as well as their level of knowledge and cultural tastes. It will be analyzed what the main socio-economic factors are that might influence their cultural preferences and consumption patterns.

4.1 Boundary Drawing Around Other Consumers' Taste

4.1.1 Consumption Patterns of Western Popular Culture

The term "Western popular culture" in China mainly refers to popular cultural products that are produced and released in the Euro-American/Anglo-Saxon world. Most of the interviewees defined Western popular culture as "global leading, has strong communicability, has a large audience base worldwide, and has certain artistic values" (Favilla, 21, student). Their main consumed cultural forms are, firstly, music, including, first and foremost, trendy pop music. The most mentioned pop singers are Taylor Swift, Ed Sheeran, Justin Bieber, Katy Perry, Lady Gaga, Shawn Mendes, Sia, and Troye Sivan. These names are often seen and heard on music top chats, social media platforms and entertainment news, and they are both very popular in China. According to interviewees, they are attracted by those music mainly because of the beautiful melody, chilling rhythm, the singers that are talented or just because they can simply make people happy and relaxed. Second, electronic dance music is referred to by respondents, especially the

house music that is created by record producers, DJs and music artists, which is ruling the radio and charts currently. Third, classic rock music is mentioned, bands including Pink Floyd, Queen, Nirvana, and Oasis. Fourth and finally, light music, such as some mood music and film soundtracks.

In film consumption, the interviewees' preferences are also varying. All of the respondents said that they go to the cinema very often to watch new Hollywood films. This April, during the period of interviewing, *Avengers: Endgame* was going to be on. Most interviewees bought the high-price premiere tickets in advance and showed their big expectations. It is observed that the superhero films that are presented by Marvel and DC, Hollywood fiction and action films, and animation films are most consumed by the respondents and the wider Chinese audiences. Besides the theatrical films, some interviewees also show preferences on art films, independent films and avant-garde films. For example, the 24 years old student Lin, who studies film directing, stated that indie films and avant-garde films are her favourite because they can provide inspirations to her in artistic creation.

In TV drama consumption, American dramas seem to take the dominant position among the interviewees. Jiang and Leung (2012) state that watching American TV series is a new trend for Chinese urban petit bourgeois to modernize their lifestyles. The most popular dramas that was referred to by the respondents are sitcoms such as *Broken Girls*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Friends*, and *Modern Family*; Sci-Fi series such as *Game of Thrones*, *Black Mirror*, *Doctor Who*, *Westworld*; comedies like *Fleabag*, *Sex and the City*; and several medial, crime and political dramas that are produced by Netflix and HBO. Some interviewees emphasized that they started watching American TV dramas at a very young age and their choices are changing with age. And they tend to binge-watch the new seasons and new dramas to be able to follow the trend.

4.1.2 Preferences for Chinese Popular Culture

Although all the participants have some tastes in common in terms of consuming Western popular culture, however, their consumption styles and preferences toward Chinese popular culture are varying. Four types of consumption styles are found and categorized. First is *No consumption*. Gu Wenfei, a 24 year-old girl who is going to start her master programme in the US this summer, displays a snobbish disposition that “everything from the West is the best”. She avoids consuming any Chinese popular culture in order to show her distinctive taste among friends:

“Chinese popular culture updates very fast, I hate it always imitates different cultural forms from other countries and lack of creative originality. You should

have your own characteristics, that's why I don't like it. And as an Asian, I feel it's very feigned, unrealistic and inauthentic...When I am in a group chat and all the friends are talking about Chinese entertainment circle and new TV series, most of the contents I've never heard, but this feeling makes me special and different, like my interest is non-mainstream.”

The second consumption mode is *ironic consumption*. Gitlin (1989) argues that in the postmodern age, consumers also tend to seek pleasures from the commodified popular culture by celebrating its awfulness, yet to show their superiority to the market of mass culture. This is in line with the research by McCoy and Scarborough (2014), who have examined how people viewing bad television programmes that they label as “stupid” and “trash”. An ironic viewing style is also found in this research. Unlike the traditional viewing style, respondents who engage in ironic consumption also judged items on the criterion of “badness”, and catch the chance to make fun of it. One interviewee elaborates:

“Sometimes I also watch bad Chinese films in the cinema because I just want to know how bad they can be! Of course, I won't tell my friends or ask them to join me, I don't want people to doubt my taste. For example, *The Ex-File: The Return of the Exes* (前任 3), in the beginning, I didn't have the plan to watch it. But when I saw it achieved 1 billion RMB box office, I was like I have to know why a stupid romantic popcorn movie has such an achievement.” (Lin, 24, Shanghai, MA Film and Television Directing)

The third consumption style is *conformity consumption*. Asch (1952) conducted an investigation to know how group pressure shapes individual's behaviour in social settings. He found out that many people unconsciously compromise their behaviours and judgements to avoid being different from peers. As a result, individuals who do not label themselves as conformists also tend to follow the group by adjusting their behaviours in some occasions. In this research, interviewees who are still students all showed their unwillingness to conform their schoolmates or friends regarding cultural consumption, because they have a lot of time to explore new movies, music or TV series to constantly refine their tastes. Uniqueness and not following the trend are what they emphasized. However, respondents who already joint work talked about the importance of having something to talk with peers. In the workplaces, new Chinese dramas, variety shows, movies, or gossip news are normally the hot topics. In order to follow the colleagues'

conversations, one respondent said:

“For instance, if a Chinese TV drama is always on Weibo hot-topic or people around me all talk about it, I’ll watch it even it’s not my type. I don’t want to be outdated, at least when talking with my colleagues I should be able to follow their tempos. So it’s like I watch it with an attitude of watching the fun, for integrating into the society and having something to talk with people, not simply because I like it.” (Yang, 27, Shanghai, public relation officer)

The forth consumption style is *selective consumption*. Interviewees who belong to this group expressed a more eclectic disposition. Unlike the previous groups, they don’t draw clear distinctive boundaries with “Chinese popular culture” and “Western popular culture”, instead, good quality and bad quality is what they concerned and distinguished. “I don’t reject to consume domestic popular culture. Normally I check audiences’ reviews first and then decide to watch it or not. I won’t reject to watch it only because it is produced in China. For me, no matter Western or Chinese cultural products, quality is more important for me.” (Wang Xiaotong, 21, student, Hong Kong). Unlike the previous three consumption styles, respondents who adopt selective consumption also consume a lot of Chinese popular culture in daily life in a more tolerant manner.

4.1.3 Aesthetic Judgements on Chinese Popular Culture

In terms of the quality, theme and content, artistic values, and ideology that embedded in Chinese popular culture, all the interviewees shared their critics, aesthetic judgements and suggestions with respect to national cultural, economic and political aspects. Two significant phenomena that generated from the interviews will be mentioned in this section, *government control of popular culture production* and *fan economy*, which are considered as the two main trends that potentially limit the positive development of Chinese popular culture.

Chinese TV dramas were referred frequently by respondents. They divided Chinese trendy TV dramas into three dominated categories: *urban affectional teleplay* (portraying contemporary social issues such as struggles in the workplaces, family relations, marriage problems and conflicts in love stories), *costume drama* (locating stories hundreds years ago, mostly happening in the imperial palace and featuring the court fights between women), and *war-themed drama* (especially the theme of anti-Japanese War, and the Chinese Civil War). According to Ma (2014), these types belong to “main melody dramas” which refers to a new official genre. With the

globalization and commercialization of Chinese media, the way that the State Party has been using cultural products as propaganda has been challenged by the market dynamics. The emerging of the main melody drama tends to “transform the *direct propaganda* of socialist drama into *ideological persuasion* so that it can effectively address the market’s demands and the needs of consumerist audiences” (p. 524). And “main melody drama thus demonstrates a distinct aesthetic that combines the propagandistic aesthetics of socialist drama and the commercial aesthetics of popular drama” (p. 528). However, those young metropolitans do not accept this kind of aesthetic value and reject the ideological persuasion. They characterized this kind of dramas (as well as Chinese film production) as “shallow”, “superficial”, “brainwashed”, “unitary themes”, “twisted value”, “lack of uniqueness”, “poor quality” and “inauthentic”. They prefer to spend time on consuming meaningful works, which can arouse resonance and deeper thinking.

“It attributes to the fickle ambience of the whole society, people don’t like thinking. Chinese popular culture can quickly catch people’s eyes and the public attention, but after that, nothing left. I mean there is no meaningful content. And I don’t know why, in all the music, television and film works, I only see the theme of love and marriage, or patriotism, but actually there are more interesting themes that can be promoted.” (Jocelyn, 28, Xi’an, PhD Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics)

Regarding the problem of the unitary theme in the Chinese popular culture production, Lin, who studies film making and directing in Shanghai Theatre Academy, responded:

“As an artist, I have to say I feel disappointed about the future prospects of art development in our country. Maybe our social environment is still not that open and tolerant. Even in our school, you know, it’s a national top art school, some sensitive topics you cannot film, such as homosexual, transgender group, Aids, corruption, or any topics that related to sensitive social issues. There is no policy or express terms which say that it is not allowed but everyone knows that you cannot touch these fields. I believe there are many talented artists in our country, but they are limited by this social environment.”

It is very obvious that the central government hope to educate and inspire the public ethically through the cultural products, in order to maintain a harmony and stable social environment.

Moreover, besides the issue of government control, surprisingly, all the respondents mentioned the fan economy with a reprobative tone. They both agree that current Chinese media and some entertainment companies are seeking new means to generate profits without considering the artistic value of cultural products. Liang and Shen (2016) refer to “fan culture” as to the identifiable attitudes, behaviours and customs within a fan group, with which similar preferences for a pop star or a band are expressed. These fan groups often spend a lot of energy and money to support their idols and celebrating their idol’s achievements. Thus, understanding the preferences of the fan groups and satisfying their emotional needs become the key tasks for media and entertainment companies. Interviewees defined those fan groups as crazy and stupid, and they cannot accept that art for art’s sake is becoming art for fans’ sake. For them, the trend of fan economy has lowered down the quality of Chinese popular culture products. “The artistic skills and quality of the works are not necessary any more, as long as they can make money with their pretty faces”, one says angrily. In line with how Frankfurt School scholars criticized on cultural industry, the respondents also claimed that current Chinese entertainment industries promoting low quality cultural products that bring people immediate satisfaction without thinking about the realness or the reality. The masses swallow the rubbish not because it satisfies their basic needs, but they are aesthetically affected and governed by the cultural industry.

“It’s obviously driven by money and business. A group of people (capitalists) are trying to using money to influence the aesthetics of the whole society. It’s like they tell you what is the best, what is the mainstream aesthetics. Then after people are brainwashed, they provide the pop idols that cater to this aesthetics, then people will actively spend money on them. Because this business mode generates really huge revenue, so all the entertainment companies following, that’s why now Chinese popular culture has lost its uniqueness.” (Coco, 23, Beijing, MA Chemical Engineering)

Among the fan groups, young girls are the major power since they are easily attracted by the pop star’s appearance and blindly worship them. According to most of the female respondents, the aesthetics of “soft masculinity” is what they despise. Most popular Chinese boy bands, idols are featured with the image of “pretty boys” or “flower boys”, which origins from Japanese and Korean popular culture (Louie, 2012). Over the last decade, Korean Wave has attracted an even greater following in East Asian countries. The soft masculinity that is depicted in Japanese and Korean popular culture has deeply influenced the way in which young Asian women perceive

desirable masculinity. Nowadays, in CJK (Chinese, Japanese, Korean) culture, the soft image of the male is directly related to the buying power of female fans, especially young groups that use the Internet effectively. Interviewees deem this kind of idol image commercially designed and inauthentic, and they prefer how the West portrays men and women in cultural products. “Men should be powerful, muscled, strong, masculine, and women should be independent and as powerful as men, not being soft and cute.” This idea is embedded in their value system as they showed their distinctive taste on the standard of beauty.

Comparing Western popular culture with Chinese popular culture, interviewees made a clear distinction based on the aesthetic judgements of the content, quality, and value of cultural products. Why are they specifically into Western popular culture? Several main reasons are generated: First, to gain cosmopolitan cultural capital. Through consuming Western popular culture, they can learn more about Western society as well as improve their language skills in the meanwhile. Gaining a global orientation and pursuing a Western lifestyle are the main motives of consumption. “I started listening to the Backstreet Boys and watching American TV series when I was very little. And I really like the American accent so I like to listen to how they talk on TV and I also practice by myself. It feels so good if you can talk naturally like an English native speaker, that’s also my goal.” Elaborated by Gu Wenfei, a girl who is going to start her master study in the US this summer.

Second, in contrast with Chinese cultural products, the themes and topics that are depicted in Western Television and film works are diversified and more creative. The reflection of social reality and the presentation of some sensitive issues trigger their curiosity and interest because that is not common to see in Chinese works.

Third, the quality of Western popular culture is much higher. Unlike using pop idols to attract consumers, interviewees pay close attention to the product’s intrinsic quality, such as actors should have good acting skills, singers can write nice songs, the special effects in films should be advanced and high-tech.

Fourth, the values and beliefs that are expressed within Western popular culture are highly valued by the respondents. For example, everyone has the rights to pursue their dreams; women can be independent and not necessarily adhere to men; love is love, love has nothing to do with age and gender. Nowadays, Chinese youngsters are facing a lot of pressure from family, work, and social relationships. The constraints and conventions that are derived from Chinese traditional moral ideas are causing many conflicts between social norms and individual’s self-awareness. For example, interviewee Stan expressed that, as a gay, he sometimes feels disappointed at his surroundings because most people do not accept and understand this kind of

identity. However, in Western popular music, movies or TV dramas, LGBT group is normally nondiscriminatory depicted. In consuming Western popular culture, some respondents like Stan seem to immerse themselves in a utopian world and enjoy the inner peace. More about this will be illustrated in later discussions regarding participants' political dispositions.

4.1.4 Views Toward Chinese Popular Culture Lovers

Judging on people in an explicit way is somewhat considered *déclassé* in Western societies. However, for those Chinese upper middle-class well-educated youngsters, their judgements toward other people's cultural taste are quite explicit. Thus, their sense of distinction is easily drawn during the conversations. They tend to distinguish themselves with the Chinese popular culture lovers by judging their cultural taste and aesthetic disposition on the basis of educational level, age, social class, occupation and place of residence. Firstly, they think most Chinese popular culture consumers are low educated because their educational level does not allow them to pursue spiritual satisfaction and thus quality cultural consumption is something not embedded in their mind. Also, their limited knowledge and competencies restrict their assessment of cultural products with certain artistic values or deep social meanings. Nevertheless, some argue that high education does not promise a good cultural taste as well, since aesthetic disposition (Bourdieu, 1984) is the determining factor. For Bourdieu, the aesthetic disposition is a capacity to appreciate form rather than function in cultural consumption. According to a few respondents, most of the Chinese popular culture consumers do not have a well-developed aesthetic disposition, and this is directly related to the nation's educational system and especially arts education. Some interviewees mentioned that arts education in the Chinese school system does not function effectively in cultivating students' artistic knowledge and skills, which has led to the masses lack the ability of aesthetic appreciation. Some scholars have reported that in China, the examination-oriented education system has put art subjects aside in a marginalized position within the curriculum, since art is considered as minor learning since it is not required in the College Entrance Examination (Yue, 2009; Zhong et. al, 2013).

“In our education system, I can say that aesthetics is an unfamiliar word for most people. In a person's growth process, normally there is no clear guidance to tell them what is good and what is bad, what is beautiful and what is awful. Not in school, neither at home. So I think in social practices and cultural practices, the masses are easily brainwashed by the unified standard of aesthetic value because they don't have an independent aesthetic taste.” (Jocelyn, 28, Xi 'an, PhD Foreign Linguistics

and Applied Linguistics)

Some respondents who hold similar views as Jocelyn emphasized that compared with the masses, they have a more developed aesthetic taste which was gained from higher education and long-term cultural edification both from their families and growth environment. This will be discussed more detailed in the later section with respect to the cultural preferences of Chinese omnivores and their social-economic background.

Moreover, consuming fan culture that is in favor of pop idols is labeled as “lowest taste” by the interviewees. However, it is also very common that some highly educated young people like watching Chinese soap dramas or join the fan groups. Interviewees categorized those people as “doing for fun”, “not serious towards cultural consumption”, and “do not have much time spending on arts and culture”. For instance, they could be college students, white-collar workers, or people from non-arts and humanities disciplines. Therefore, it is obvious to see that cultural capital is still the main measurement for judging people’s taste. For Chinese popular culture consumers with higher education, respondents showed a tolerant attitude that could be summarized in terms of “understandable”, “they might be busy with work”, “not everyone interests in cultural consumption”. According to Bourdieu (1984), that is functional aesthetic. For younger or lower educated consumers, they expressed a very distinctive manner, as labeling their taste as “very bad”, and “undeveloped”.

Secondly, the place of residence matters in shaping people’s cultural taste. Since all the respondents come from the most developed regions in China, it is much easier for them to access to rich cultural resources, internationalized environment, and best opportunities to keep in line with latest trends. They tend to draw clear symbolic boundaries with small city dwellers by means of the living standard and thus cultural taste. A girl who lives in Shanghai points out straightforwardly:

“For us, the first-tier city dwellers, people’s average education level and resources are obviously higher. But you know, China is a big country that consists of regions with different economic levels. After all, most consumers are from lower-tier cities. Compared to us, they probably have lower taste because they don’t have a diverse entertainment lifestyle, consuming the domestic cultural resources is all they can do in daily life.”

In order to know to what extent the respondents distinguish themselves with the Chinese

popular culture lovers, questions with regard to how their cultural taste influences their social contact were asked. Most interviewees responded that even cultural consumption is not a necessary topic in daily communications. However, it is very crucial for building and maintaining social relations. “You will expand your friend circle and meet the like-minded people, in the meanwhile, you will also lose some friends if you don’t have similar interests.” – which is a quote by Favilla, a 21 years old student. Here we can see that in the Chinese context, cultural capital and social capital are closely intertwined.

In summary, this section presents the distinction practices of the Western popular culture lovers, from the perspective of how they aesthetically distance from Chinese popular cultural products as well as its consumers. Their different consumption styles display different degrees of distinction. Nevertheless, their aesthetic judgements toward the domestic cultural products and views towards other consumers are quite unified, as they tend to put themselves on a higher social and cultural position holding the superiority in cultural consumption. Education background, occupation, city of residence, age, and profession all play key roles in the distinction making process.

4.2 Distinction Within Western Popular Culture Consumption

Since the Western popular culture is very broad and involves many different forms and genres, consumers are also varying in taste. Based on their preferences within Western popular culture consumption and the way in which they describe their choices, distinction is also achieved *within* this group of consumers. At the beginning of the last section, interviewee’s consumption patterns are concluded regarding Western popular music, film and TV series. Within those forms and genres, two ways of boundary drawing can be identified: “what” to consume and “how” to consume.

4.2.1 Making Distinction Through “What” to Consume

Originally, achieving distinction through “what” to consume predominantly refers to the hierarchical relations between highbrow and lowbrow cultural forms (Bourdieu, 2010), and later suggested to other dimensions of distinction such as local versus global (Prieur & Savage, 2013). Previous studies also found that within distinct music genres, there is a hierarchical order (e.g. van Poecke, 2017). In this research, taking Western popular culture as a whole, respondents display two types of distinction regarding the genres of music, films and TV series based on their own aesthetic criteria. First is *commercial/mainstream versus non-commercial/indie genres*. Since in the Chinese market, most Western cultural products are imported to be consumed, thus a

certain commercial value is adhered. But some people also have the passion and interest to explore more genres beyond those commodified cultural products. For instance, in film consumption, indie films, art films, and avant-garde films are differentiated from commercial films. For some interviewees, cinema movies are what they consumed most frequently, but for a few of them, cinema movies are considered as “vulgar” (mentioned frequently by the interviewees) since they are available and understandable for everyone. Pursuing the emotional resonance, artistic value and deeper thoughts from the cultural products makes them feel that they are doing something meaningful, not wasting time. Consuming works that require intellectual understanding therefore is a symbol of being well-educated and sophisticated.

“I don’t like commercial films that much, in the beginning I was even kind of reject to watch that. I remember when I was still in college, I had the feeling that I want to distinguish myself with people around me, like we don’t have same preferences. I never go to the cinemas watching cinema movies at that time, because those commercial films have no aesthetic values. You can watch for fun but that’s all. But art film is something different, the messages and attitudes it delivers are exactly what I want to say. My favourite movie is *Todo sobre mi madre*, directed by the Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar. It’s a very high quality film and I only recommend it to people who have good taste because normal people won’t get it.”
(Joy, 27, Hangzhou, BA Arts in Journalism)

Second is *trendy/new versus classic/old genres*. This type of distinction has been especially noticed within Western popular music consumption. Current top charts music, electronic music and Hip-Pop music are considered to be the outcome of standardization, less creativity and lack of experimental spirit. In contrast, some of high quality old music that have been circulating for a long time are labeled as classic and valuable by the respondents, even those music are rather outdated in the West. Consuming those music represents having a refined taste. Music bands such as Nirvana, Pink Floyd, and Oasis are mentioned by interviewee Favilla:

“The first time when I listened to Nirvana, I was totally hooked. After that, I basically only listen to this kind of classic rock music. It’s completely different from the current trendy popular music, as it makes me feel like, ah, music can be such inspiring and experimental! Kurt Cobain makes music for expressing himself, but not compromised to the commercialization or the masses’ taste. Also, in the lyrics, there is certain artistry, emotional involvement and pioneering

thoughts embedded.”

As a trendy music lover, Gu Wenfei (24, student, Shanghai) said that renewing her playlist and trying new music are must-do things for her everyday, “If I find nice new songs, I’ll feel good whole day”. She also goes to nightclubs with friends very often and thus electronic dance music is her favourite genre. However, few interviewees considered listening to electronic music is a lowbrow taste because it provides listeners immediate satisfaction without substantial value.

4.2.2 Making Distinction Through “How” to Consume

Earlier studies also proved that the pursuit of cultural distinction is not only a matter of what to consume, but also the way how objects are consumed (McCoy and Scarborough, 2017; Bryson, 1996; Daenekindt & Roose, 2014). Especially for highly educated consumers who have more cultural capital, they are more likely to adopt a critical manner in the interpretation of cultural objects (Holt, 1997). In consuming Western popular culture, distinction occurs with regard to the way that consumers decode the cultural texts. Making meaning of the cultural objects from a *negotiated position* (Hall, 1980) is somewhat more active and intellectual than following the preferred meaning that is encoded by the producers (*active consumption versus passive consumption*). The active audiences reject to be ruled by the dominated ideology that is distributed through the Western cultural industries, instead, they opt to create their own social identities by being autonomic in the reception process. For most Chinese consumers, Western culture brings them some unconventional values and beliefs which they have never experienced in Chinese society. Thus accepting the Western ideas that is distributed through cultural products is a means to be ideally stood out from the crowd. Nevertheless, the active audiences hold a different view. A respondent who is currently studying in Hong Kong, has been travelling a lot around the world, and has half-year exchange experience in Switzerland, illustrated:

“My perspectives were gradually changing as I have seen a lot of the world. When I was young, in my mind, the West is like a kingdom of freedom. I sometimes imagined how good their life is and how free their social atmosphere is. But when I grow up and actually visited there, things did not exactly match my imagination. Now I feel that every country has its advantages and shortcomings and every society has its own mode of operation. Those people who are easily brainwashed by the American movies have a lack of independency in their mind and they don’t see the world with their eyes. Adopting the Western rules in the Chinese society is

obvious not applicable, and using the Western value to against our country is not a cool behaviour.” (Wang Xiaotong, 21, Hong Kong, BA History)

Another girl, Jocelyn, who also has many oversea exchange experiences, expressed a similar attitude. Hence, It can be concluded that people’s activeness in interpretation is also closely linked to the volume of cosmopolitan cultural capital. Being in contact with the Western world and its lifestyle in real life is different from getting familiar with the Western countries through its cultural products. The more oversea living/study/travelling experiences they have, the more active they are in the interpretation process. Thus, the activeness is a means to distinguish from the passive audiences. Their critical tones toward Western popular culture are mainly from the angle of political views, which will be discussed in the following section.

The second approach of making distinction through “how” to consume is distinguishing *serious consumption with entertainment consumption*. Therefore, cultural objects are also classified according to their functions in everyday life. For instance, some respondents stated that even they are not into the trendy pop music, however, they still listen to it while doing exercises, while walking or in any other circumstances that do not require deep thinking. “Sometimes I watch soap dramas while having dinner, like *Broken girls*, *Modern Family*. It’s funny and relaxing to watch, good for mealtime. But most of the time, I will choose more serious movies or dramas to watch to learn something from it and to provoke reflective thoughts.” (Stan, student, 19). The emphasis on not serious in “popular aesthetics” is thus a way to distance from the masses by means of how to use it in daily life. Moreover, a few also displayed their “pure gaze” (Bourdieu, 1984) in consumption mode, which implies that distancing aesthetic appreciation from daily necessity is somehow superior to functional use and vulgar enjoyment. Hence, evaluating and judging the cultural products from an unordinary way makes them feel distinctive:

“I am a person that have watched many high-end films. Maybe because I study film making and directing, I normally look at a film from different perspectives, a higher status, and a more professional viewing angle than others. But the mass audiences are not standing on this position, they watch movies for fun and for entertainment. So I would say, if you consume Western popular culture with this kind of purpose, no matter with films, TV series or music, your taste is not higher than anyone else. ” (Lin, 24, Shanghai, MA Television and Film Directing)

4.3 Chinese Cultural Omnivorousness

Since currently there are no researches available that translate the concept of cultural omnivores (Peterson, 1992) into the Chinese context, therefore, one objective of this study is to investigate whether cultural omnivores exist in China and the characteristics of their cultural practices, as well as their socio-economic background. Firstly, their consumption practices in high art and folk art will be measured, as well as their attitudes toward the hierarchy of different cultural forms. Secondly, combined with the interviewee's political preferences, a Chinese political landscape will be written here to help us to understand how Chinese political and democratic transformations shaped people's cultural taste and political preferences, as well as perceiving how globalization and cultural imperialism play a part in this process. Last but not least, the youngsters' socio-economic characters will be analyzed. Results show that educational degree, cosmopolitan orientation, city of residence, profession, family economic status and personal income are the main potential factors that might trigger their cultural consumption practices.

4.3.1 Consumption of High Art and Folk Art

Traditionally, high art is differentiated from popular and folk art in terms of intrinsic characteristics. For example, high art embodies genius and serious intellectual-aesthetic experience which requires more training to understand (Alexander, 2003). The distinction mainly comes from class relationships in society. Even today, while the power of elite taste has decreased, consuming high art is still a symbol of being well educated in some Western countries (Kane, 2003). In the interviews, respondents were asked to give a definition of high art. According to their descriptions, high art is understood as a cultural form that contains rich and complex contents, which requires certain educational training to appreciate. All the respondents stated that they have the interest to consume high art and frequently participate in high cultural events, however, they tend to display an open-minded attitude on art appreciation. They will not engage with the high art deeply as immediate enjoyment is what they would rather pursue. "I go to a museum sometimes if there is a new exhibition or something. But most of the time, I can't say that I understand what the artworks are trying to express and I don't have the ability to analyze the paintings, like the techniques or the artists. I just like going there as a leisure activity." (Joy, 27). In line with Hanquinet et.al (2014), new aesthetic criteria have integrated in contemporary forms of distinction on highbrow cultural consumption, such as eclecticism and playfulness. This was found in this research as well.

Interestingly, since all the interviewees are in favor of Western popular culture, their preference for high culture specifically refers to the Western high art forms as well, such as

Western fine arts, theatre play, dance-ballet, literature, opera and symphony. Only very few associated high art with Chinese traditional high art forms. Therefore, the youngsters' cultural taste in general is westernized.

In addition, Savage et.al (2013) and Bennett et.al (2009) found that compared to the younger groups, the older groups are more attracted to high cultural forms. However, this is opposite in China. Respondents characterized the high art consumer as mostly young and well educated. The middle-aged and the older generation are rarely engaged in those highbrow activities due to some historical and political reasons. In the last hundred years before the 1980s, the whole country was in the war and unrest for a very long period. Education was only available for a small group of people, that is, the ruling class. From 1966 to 1977, the college entrance examination was cancelled during the Cultural Revolution and students were banned to go to universities. Mao's government meant to wipe out potential threats, meaning that educated people would have the power to against the government (Lee and Ho, 2005). Thus, compared to the young generation, the Chinese older generations are much lower in education rate, so that this has greatly influenced their cultural practices. In highbrow cultural participation, young people seem to hold greater interest. Accordingly, this research has also found that parents' cultural capital has significant impacts on cultivating children's taste in highbrow culture. Respondents who have cultural elite parents are more likely to deeply engaged in high cultural activities under parents' edification. Gu Wenfei, whose mother is a high school headmaster and also a pianist, stated:

“I go to the classical music concert very often with my mom since I was young. Sometimes my mother also takes me to the other cities if there is a great concert. I also play many instruments myself because my mom is professional in this area. So my interest in classical music contributes to my mom's cultivation.”

Folk art, which refers to community-created artistic activities, is normally categorized as a lower cultural form by sociologists. For those Chinese youngsters, folk art is more associated with the national spirit, cultural inheritance, craftsmanship and intangible cultural heritage which involves high historical and artistic values. Since many Chinese high cultures such as Chinese opera, classical music, calligraphy, engraving are rooted in folk communities with thousands of years' of history, folk art is thus something that has higher status. “I think folk art is like the popular form of high art. On the one hand, it has very high artistic value and inheritance value, but on the other hand, it is also accessible for ordinary people, like normal people without high education can also write calligraphy at home, or sing Beijing Opera in the park. If you ask me to

give a rank, I would say folk art is a little bit lower than high art but much higher than popular culture.” (Jocelyn, 28, PhD Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics). Other interviewees also gave similar answers.

In general, regarding the respondents’ broader cultural consumption patterns, it is clear to see that they are interested in various cultural forms rather than gaining prestige through consuming legitimate culture. They opt to adopt an “open” and “tolerant” attitude toward cultural hierarchies. Therefore, in this sense, these Chinese young metropolitans can be defined as cultural omnivores. They have very broad cultural preferences both in consuming highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow culture. Firstly, regarding popular culture, they prefer Western productions (popular music, movies, TV dramas) rather than Chinese productions. Within Western popular cultural consumption, interviewees have very different choices as well. Such as some prefer commercial products while some prefer indie genres, some are more into trendy cultural products while some like old and classic ones. Secondly, their tastes on highbrow culture are also westernized, as they are mostly interested in Western fine arts, classical music, serious literature, and theatre performances. Thirdly, even the respondents basically connected folk art with cultural heritage and something artistry, however, consuming folk art is not really necessary in their daily lives because it is quite outdated for them. Lastly, what they do not like in common are low quality Chinese popular culture products, including variety shows, boy/girl bands, main melody dramas, and popcorn movies. In addition, the *variety* of their cultural taste has been studied, however, the *typicality* (Goldberg et al., 2016) is beyond my research scope. As for what types of omnivore are they, I believe poly-purists do exist among the participants, which requires in-depth investigation in further researches.

4.3.2 Political Dispositions

According to Bourdieu (1984), class habitus and people’s political opinions are interlinked. Fishman and Lizardo (2013) also argue that omnivorous practices are varying in different countries due to the impacts of a nation’s historical development and institutional basis. To what extent the Western popular culture has influenced those Chinese omnivores’ political preferences is a crucial question to inquire. Firstly, results show that they are more likely to concern about the current political situation and social news both in China and worldwide, and display the identity of “global citizens” with a broad life pattern. When they talked about the news that recently happened, such as the Notre-Dame cathedral fire, New Zealand Christchurch mosque shooting, and global refugee crisis, they showed an attitude that keeping up with current affairs is the duty of a cosmopolite.

“Some people have really small world views, they only care about themselves and their small social world, like making themselves pretty and rich are all they want to do in life. This is so narrow-minded. But I’m not like that, I care about our society and everything that happens in the world. I read the world news everyday and sometimes discuss the social issues with friends.” (Yang, 27, Shanghai, public relation officer)

Secondly, the distribution of Western (especially the American) popular cultural products worldwide also leads to cultural hegemony, as the exported cultural products can somehow put ideologies into consumers’ mind. Under the impact of cultural globalization and mass media, these young Chinese cultural omnivores’ values and beliefs are highly shaped by the Western value system and therefore most of them have very idealized version of the West. For example, they are very much emphasized on the universal values such as independence, freedom, and equal rights. Particularly, the issue of equal rights was mentioned by all the respondents, including the equal rights for men and women, for different races, as well as for subcultural groups like LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender). In the interviews, five respondents explicitly implied that they are gay or lesbian, nine females expressed their feminist standpoint. In Asian society, this kind of identities and perspectives are not acceptable for mainstream opinions, however, they can find something to agree with in consuming Western popular culture.

“*Sex and the City* was filmed twenty years ago, but it is still enlightening for me today. It portrays the image of independent women, like they have their own careers, dreams and they have the courage to pursue the true love. They don’t need to rely on men or anybody because they are just as powerful as men. This TV series has really big impacts on me, because in the society that we live, women should get married at a certain age, then have babies, take care of the family and give up your personal pursuits. Age really matters in Asian culture, especially for women. Like if you are 30 years old and you still don’t have a stable job or you are not married, people gonna judge you like you are a loser. But I don’t think age is a problem, you will have a successful life as long as you live out your true self.” (Wang Xiaotong, female, 21, Hong Kong)

“My cognition on homosexuality was developed when I was very young. I

remember at that time my favourite writer is Oscar Wilde, and he is gay. In the beginning I didn't really understand what homosexuality is and why he went to jail for this. Then I searched for information and I realized that in Wilde's cultural context, homosexuality is something very normal and natural and they have the equal rights as heterosexual. In Western societies, people are more tolerant to homosexuals, we can see in their movies and TV dramas. I know in China some gays or lesbians are really struggled, like people around don't accept their sexual orientation. But actually, as a lesbian and I never feel struggled about my self-identity, because in my own cultural context, it's a normal thing." (Favilla, 21, Qingdao, BA Arts in Journalism)

Their advocacy of individualism, liberalism, and pluralism seems to be conflicting with Chinese traditional values and moral norms. Compared with the older Chinese generations, these young metropolitans tend to hold completely different worldviews, and this ideological shift is a result of the changing democratic landscapes in China, especially due to the changing moral education policy. According to Lee and Ho (2005), in China, moral education is an important subject in the school system because it is closely associated with politics. Therefore, moral education is another form of political education or ideological education. They identified three major periods of policy changing in moral education: Firstly, from 1949 (the foundation of new China) to 1978, moral education is politically oriented. It aimed to strengthen the communist moral qualities and socialist ideologies among students. The ideas of anti-American imperialism, anti-capitalism were embedded in people's mind, and citizen values such as nationalism, collectivism, self-sacrifice and patriotism were the main focus of moral education. Secondly, from 1978 to 1993, the focus of moral education was gradually switched from political education to individual moral-cultivation, which emphasized citizenship, moral standards and behaviours, as well as the development of self-esteem. Thirdly, since 1993 to present days, as China opened the market economy to the world, teaching the young citizens personal qualities that would match the demands of the global market economy thus became the goal of education. Since then, the moral education in school has been depoliticized. In the 21st century, the development of global awareness and self-value have become the new emphasis in moral education, which implies China is becoming more integrated into the globalization process. Even the Western world criticized a lot on the political control and the neglects of human rights in China, but Lee and Ho's study pointed out that the whole country is internally moving on a democratization track.

Those participants, the young omnivores who are growing up in this globalizing

environment, their political dispositions tend to be more globalized as well. Hence, the ideological conflicts between the young and older generation are rooted in the reformation of politics, as well as the economy and educational system in the past decades. Like interviewee Jocelyn said:

“If we talk about the issues of LGBT groups, I think our government holds a very neutral attitude to this, they don’t support it yet are neither against. The key is the attitude of the mass. Because you know, in China, like 80 percent people have no idea about what LGBT is or what feminism is. How can you expect your parents or your grandparents’ generations understanding this? It’s not possible because they are not like us that growing up in the new age. So my opinion is, when the LGBT groups ask for understandings from the society, they also need to understand the mass and give them more time. You cannot just compare with the Western world, that’s not right.”

In sum, regarding the changing political dispositions of the young generation, it can be noticed that globalization and the international flow of Western popular culture have been bringing Western values and ideologies to the Chinese context and have had great impacts on people’s lifestyle and beliefs. On the one hand, these Western ideologies can somehow liberate some people’s thoughts as it very much emphasized individualism, liberalism and pluralism, which match those youngsters’ identity as “global citizens”. But on the other hand, due to China’s distinguishing historical and political development, applying the Western universal values on current Chinese society, untimely will also lead to ideological conflicts between different generations and social groups.

4.3.3 Cultural preferences and Socio-economic Background

To what extent the respondents’ socio-economic backgrounds might influence their cultural taste and their sense of distinction is one of the research questions posed in this project. In Western countries, studies show that cultural omnivores are normally highly educated. This research has found the same pattern. All the ten participants were selected randomly, but coincidentally, they both have received higher education, ranging from bachelor to PhD. Thus, we can argue that those Chinese young omnivores generally have high cultural capital, in this research both noticed by the “objectified state”, the “institutionalized state” and the “embodied state” (Bourdieu, 2002). More importantly, Most of them have a cosmopolitan orientation. Four participants have had

study and exchange experiences in Europe and the US, and four students have the plan to study in the Western countries in the near future. As mentioned before, gaining cosmopolitan cultural capital is one of the motives to consume Western popular culture, interviewees demonstrated their high cosmopolitan cultural capital by showing they have good language skills (mastered in English or be able to speak more than one foreign languages), have travelled a lot, and are familiar with the Western culture and lifestyles. Particularly, results show that family's economic capital is the key element to determine their amount of cosmopolitan cultural capital.

“Normally, if someone likes Western popular culture, he or she probably has oversea study experiences or has lived in Western countries for a while. Or went to international school in China, which means they are from upper-middle class families with good economic base. You know, it takes a lot of money to become an internationalized talent.” (Wang Xiaotong, Hong Kong, 21, student)

Moreover, economic capital (family income and personal income) also tied to “quality taste” in cultural consumption. To pursue the optimal experiences, sometimes people have to pay more on the tickets or participation costs.

“I go to theatres very often to watch musicals and dramas. Most of the time I prefer to go alone because you know I don't have budget problems so I always bought the front row tickets. But many of my friends are not willing to pay that price, so why I have to lower my standard if I can afford the tickets.” (Yang, 27, studied Master of Cultural Management in the UK)

“I normally go to film festivals alone. Most of my friends are not belonging to the art field so I don't think they will pay for the high price tickets.” (Lin, 24, MA Film and Television Directing)

Therefore, no doubt that having the knowledge and abilities (cultural capital) to perceive cultural products is important, however, having sufficient money to support the quality consumption is also very necessary. Furthermore, besides the consumption in cultural products, results also suggest that respondents' preferences on food are not relevant to their cultural tastes or cultural capital, but economic capital. In contrary to some studies (e.g. van Poecke, 2017), which argue that people who have refined taste in cultural consumption are also picky on food

choices, these Chinese youngsters are more likely to adopt the attitude of “anything goes” on food. Go to upscale restaurants or buy high quality food only happen to the consumers with higher economic capital. Most stated that types of food or the quality of food don’t really matter, but the expenditures should meet their budgets.

Except education background and economic capital, city of residence is another crucial factor for cultivating one’s omnivorous taste and interest in Western popular culture. Living in a metropolis means residents are more easily in contact with foreign cultures, they have more opportunity to access rich cultural resources and very decent public cultural facilities (museums, theatres, libraries, cultural centers and etc.), as well as that the social atmosphere is more ‘open’ and ‘tolerant’. For example, most famous opera/musical/concert/dance tours and world-famous exhibitions are only available on first-tier cities basically, especially in Beijing and Shanghai. People who live in small towns or far away from the metropolis can hardly access those resources.

Furthermore, people’s socio-professional attributes play a role in shaping one’s cultural taste as well. Nine of the interviewees are from the field of arts and humanities, such as journalism, language studies, design, history and cultural management. Compared to those who study science and engineering, most interviewees characterized themselves as “sensitive, exquisite, idealized and romantic” in daily life, and they are more likely to pursue the spiritual wealth seriously from arts and cultural products. An informed and well-cultivated cultural taste thus will be generated spontaneously. As one interviewee illustrated:

“People’s taste on cultural consumption is sometimes associated with their disciplines. Like us, we study humanities and social sciences, so we are more like a bard everyday, have a lot of fantasies and more idealized toward anything. My boyfriend is a programmer, although he has high education, but he doesn’t even have a taste in arts and culture. He doesn’t have his own choices, like he watches everything play on TV, and listens to all the music on the radio. I tell him very often like you should develop your taste a little bit, don’t watch those silly dramas, otherwise you gonna be stupid. Now I gave up, I think he is that kind of very pragmatic person, he is totally not serious in art because he is from a different profession.” (Jocelyn, 28, Xi ’an, PhD Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics)

In conclusion, results show that cultural capital and family’s economic capital both play

key roles in determining one's cultural preferences and aesthetic dispositions. Particularly, one's global horizon, cosmopolitan cultural capital and quality of cultural consumption are closely linked to his or her economic background. Moreover, city of residence and socio-professional attributes also matter in this process.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This study has investigated the cultural consumption patterns and practices of distinction of the Chinese young metropolitans who are in favor of Western popular culture. It has concerned the topics of: how do they distinguish themselves from other consumers by means of their taste in cultural consumption? Why are they specifically into Western popular culture? Can they be defined as cultural omnivores? And how do their socio-economic attributes function in shaping their cultural taste and sense of distinction? Since the Bourdieusian theory of distinction and the omnivore debates haven't been widely studied and well applied in the Chinese society, combined with the current trend of the domination of Western popular culture in the Chinese market, it is meaningful and interesting to target those consumers and to study their cultural practices.

Firstly, results show that the interviewees often display their distinctive tastes and identities by aesthetically judging on Chinese popular culture on the basis of its contents, ideologies and quality, as well as compared with Western popular music, films and TV series. Two significant phenomena that might potentially limit the positive development of the Chinese entertainment industry are noticed, *government control of popular cultural production* and the *fan economy*. The interviewees both agreed that the forbiddance of portraying sensitive themes has led to the monotony of the cultural products, and the fan economy has lowered down the artistic quality of Chinese popular culture as well as it has affected the public's aesthetic dispositions negatively. Based on their preferences on consuming Chinese popular culture, four different consumption styles were identified: *No consumption*, *ironic consumption* (McCoy & Scarborough, 2014), *conformity consumption* and *selective consumption*, which also embody their different extents of distinctive attitude. However, their views toward Chinese popular culture lovers are unified, as interviewees tend to explicitly put themselves on a higher position that hold the superiority in arts and cultural fields. Through how the respondents describing their opinions on cultural taste and social contact, clear symbolic boundaries (Lamont, 1992) are drawn here and it has been found that *cultural capital* and *social capital* are interlinked (Ericson, 1996) in the Chinese context as well. To be specific, for most respondents, cultural taste is one of the important criteria to expend their social contacts.

In addition, taking Western popular culture as a whole, distinction also exists within this group of interviewees in terms of "what" to consume and "how" to consume (Prieur & Savage, 2013). More specifically, Western popular cultural forms such as *commercial/mainstream* and *noncommercial/indie*, *new/trendy* and *old/classic* are distinguished. The way how cultural products are consumed, such as *active consumption* and *passive consumption*, *serious consumption* and *entertainment consumption* are also distinguished. For a few respondents,

consuming cultural objects that are noncommercial, nonmainstream, authentic, contains high artistic values, require intellectual understanding and emotional involvement is a symbol of having a sophisticated taste (in line with the study by van Poecke, 2017). Interpreting the cultural products with a critical manner and displaying the “pure gaze” (Bourdieu, 1984) in aesthetic appreciation is another means to distancing from ordinary consumers.

Secondly, regarding the variety of the interviewees’ cultural preferences, all of them can be defined as cultural omnivores (Peterson, 1992), as they are both interested in highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow art and reject to draw boundaries between traditional legitimate art and other cultural forms. Similar to Michael (2017), Some Chinese young omnivores tend to engage in high cultural events rather in an open-minded manner, which is more likely to pursuit entertainment and relaxation, without putting too much effort into interpretation. Specifically, their preferences on high art is also westernized, just like their taste in popular culture. Moreover, in contrast to the findings by Savage et.al (2013) and Bennett et.al (2009), in China, young people hold more interests in consuming high art comparing to older generations due to some political-historical reasons.

To test whether the interviewees’ habitus and omnivorous practices are associated with their political dispositions (Bourdieu, 1984; Fishman and Lizardo, 2013), this paper also has explained this point from a historical perspective. With China gradually integrating into the global world, the emphasis of school education and democratization has also changed under the impact of globalization. These young omnivores who were born and grew up in this information age, their worldviews and value systems have been highly shaped by foreign cultures (in line with Zhou, 2011; Gao, 2016). After being in contact with Western popular culture for quite some time already, they are very much calling for individualism, liberalism, pluralism, and the equal rights of social groups (such as women and LGBT), which is something that runs counter to Chinese traditional moral values. Only through consuming Western popular culture, their identity of “global citizen” can be recognized.

Lastly, as for how does one’s socio-economic background might influence their cultural practices, results suggest that cultural capital does play a key part in determining one’s taste in art and cultural consumption. However, family’s economic capital works as the foundation in this process of accumulating children’s cultural capital, especially the cosmopolitan cultural capital (Priour & Savage, 2013). Developing the capacities to be a global talent requires a good deal of capital investment, such as sending children to study in foreign countries and international schools, or supporting them for outbound travel. Furthermore, in this case, one’s city of residence and socio-professional attributes also matter. Therefore, those youngsters who were born and

raised in big city (upper) middle-class families luckily hold all the advantages. Their similarities in cultural taste, aesthetic disposition, values and beliefs are not a coincidence, but a matter of necessity.

There are a few gaps and limitations of this study. Firstly, due to the lack of empirical evidences of studying the cultural distinction in China, this research only examined ten participants' viewpoints, which are not enough concrete to generalize the patterns of the Western popular culture lovers and the cultural omnivores in China. Further research should more investigate on this aspect from a macro perspective as well as symbolic interactions within small social groups. Secondly, this research targeted the youngsters from first-tier cities, new first-tier cities, and two special administration regions (Hong Kong and Macaw). However, according to the descriptions of the participants, it has been noticed that interviewees from first-tier cities (such as Beijing and Shanghai) and the special administrative regions (one from Hong Kong) displayed a higher level of sophistication in cultural consumption than the new first-tier city (such as Hangzhou, Chongqing, Xi'an, Qingdao) residents. Even they are both big cities in China, however, regarding consumer behaviour, cultural resources, infrastructures, income level, talent pool, and lifestyle, new first-tier cities still fall behind. Therefore, the target group should be more specific, for instance, the respondents should be chosen from the same tier cities. Thirdly, among the ten interviewees, nine of them are female and there is only one male on the list. The unbalance of female and male participants could limit the research findings as a consequence. For example, the relationship between gender and cultural preferences thus cannot be measured here.

As for further research, many Western studies have emphasized on *cultural reproduction* (Bourdieu, 1977), especially how parental cultural capital transmits to children. However, based on this study and previous studies, family's economic capital also plays a leading role in fostering children's cultural capital in contemporary China. Thus, here suggests further research to concern the question of how parents' cultural capital and economic capital impact on children's cultural practices in Chinese upper middle-class families. In addition, consuming fan culture and in favor of pop idols are disdained by all the interviewees in this research because the target audiences are normally young and superficial, but some mentioned that it is also very common to see that there are a lot of highly educated young people existed in the fan groups. I believe there are different types of fans consuming fan culture with different purposes and attitudes. Their motivations, preferences, behaviours, social backgrounds and sense of distinction within fan groups are also worth to investigate in the future.

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Appendix A Interview Guide (English Version)

Introduction

1. Short introduction of the research objectives and the interview procedure.
2. Ask the basic information of the participant: age, gender, city of residence, educational background, and occupation.

Cultural Preferences and Consumption Patterns

1. When speaking about your preferences for art and culture: could you give an overview of what you like and consume?
 - Can you talk about a cultural product / or a few cultural products (music/ movie/ TV series) that you like?
2. What art and cultural forms you don't like? (Why)
 - Can you give a few examples and explain why don't you like it?
3. High art refers to cultural products with aesthetic value and intellectual pursuits, which a society collectively esteem as exemplary art. When speaking about high art, what would you associate with? Are you interested in high art?
 - If yes, how do you define high art and which kind of high art do you like? Also talk about your experiences of attending high cultural event.
 - If not, how do you define high art and why you are not interested?
4. Folk art refers to art forms that rooted in traditions that come from community and culture. When speaking about folk art, what would you associate with? Are you interested in folk art?
 - If yes, how do you define folk art and which kind of high art do you like? Talk about your experiences of attending folk cultural event.
 - If not, how do you define folk art and why you are not interested?

Function of Western Popular Culture in Everyday Life

1. When speaking about Western popular culture, what would you associate with? Are you interested in Western popular culture? How much do you in favor of Western popular culture?
 - How do you define Western popular culture?
 - What forms of Western popular culture do you like?
 - Can you talk about a Western music/ movie/ TV series/ (or other popular culture forms) you have listened or watched recently?

- Who is your favourite Western singer/ actor/ or celebrity? Why do you like her/him? Can you talk about one of his/her works you like the most?
2. Have you ever participated in any Western popular cultural events?
 - If yes, how often do you attend such kinds of event? Normally with whom? How were the experiences?
 - If not, do you expect to attend someday? Which kind of event you expect to attend the most?
 3. Consumption behaviours
 - How often do you watch the (Western) film/ TV drama or listen to popular music?
 - At what moment of the day? With whom?
 - Through which kind of online channels?
 - Do you also discuss and share interesting works with your friends?
 - 4 Does Western popular culture influence your daily life in some degree?
 - The way you think/look/talk
 - Your social circle
 - Food preference (Favourite food and restaurants/ food and dining places you don't like)
 - Political preference (value and beliefs)

Sense of Distinction

1. Except Western popular culture, are you also interested in or consuming Chinese domestic popular cultural products? (Music, TV series, movies...)
 - If yes, how do you define Chinese popular culture? How do you use it in everyday life? What kind of Chinese popular cultural products do you consume? What reason you consume them? (Give examples)
 - If not, how do you define Chinese popular culture and why it is not appealing to you?
2. What are, according to you, the main differences between Chinese and Western popular culture? (Production, distribution and consumption)
3. Define the two consumer groups:
 - In you mind, what are the characteristics of the Western popular culture fans?
 - What are the characteristics of the Chinese popular culture lovers?

Appendix B Overview of the Interviewees

	Name	Age	Occupation	Residency	Education
1	Favilla	21	Student	Qingdao	BA Arts in Journalism
2	Wang Shanshan	26	Student	Qingdao	MA English Studies
3	Lin	24	Student	Shanghai	MA Film and Television Directing
4	Yang	27	Public relations officer	Shanghai	MA Cultural Management (UK)
5	Stan	19	Student	Chongqing	BA English Studies
6	Joy	27	Salesmen	Hangzhou	BA Arts in Journalism
7	Jocelyn	28	PhD Student and Assistant teacher	Xi'an	PhD Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics
8	Gu Wenfei	24	Student, intern (in an architecture design institute)	Shanghai	BA Architecture Design
9	Coco	23	Student	Beijing	MA Chemical Engineering
10	Wang Xiaotong	21	Student (history intern teacher in middle school)	Hong Kong	BA History

Appendix C Final Coding Schema

Themes	Memos	Codes
<i>Consumption of Western Popular Culture</i>	Deep investigation of how Western popular culture functions in their daily life, their consumption patterns and its impacts on their political dispositions, values and beliefs. As well as find out the answer of one of the research questions: why they specifically into the Western popular culture?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attraction factors - Forms and genres of consumption - Daily use patterns - Impact on social contact - Impact on self-identity
<i>Distinction Between the Western and Chinese Popular Culture</i>	Through investigating how they define the characteristics of Chinese popular culture and its main consumers, how they distinguish the two types of popular culture, and their consumption mode in consuming Chinese popular culture, their sense of distinction will be generated.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Aesthetic judgments on Chinese popular culture - Preferences for Chinese popular culture - Differences between the Western and Chinese popular culture - Views toward Chinese popular culture lovers
<i>Distinction Within Western Culture</i>	Western popular culture is very broad involving a lot of different forms and genres, thus the consumers are also varies in tastes. Based on their preferences and descriptions on their choices, the interviewees will be categorized by means of what they consume and how they consume. Combined with the findings from the previous sections, what types of omnivores are they thus will be identified.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What to consume - How to consume
<i>Chinese Cultural Omnivores</i>	<p>Since the interviewees were already known as popular culture lovers, to test whether they are cultural omnivores, we should know about their broader cultural tastes, such as their consumption patterns in high art and folk art.</p> <p>Here also aims to explore the socio-economic factors that might function in shaping people's omnivorous taste in the Chinese context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consumption of high art - Consumption of folk art - Attitudes toward cultural hierarchy - Political disposition - Food preferences - Social aspects - Economic aspects