Taste and Symbolic Boundaries in the Context of China:

Exploring the Discourse on Cultural Taste

of Young Highly Educated Chinese

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ABSTRACT

Since Bourdieu (1984), the function of taste as a status marker has been widely recognized in western societies, but the investigations on the relationship between taste and symbolic social boundaries in China seem to be very limited, most of the studies failing to address the function of taste as a means of making social distinction. As the cultural market has rapidly developed since the Chinese Consumer Revolution (Davis, 2000), it is necessary to gain a better understanding of cultural consumption patterns and cultural taste of Chinese citizens. Therefore, this research focuses on highly educated Chinese who grow up during the initial rising period (i.e. the 1990s) of the cultural market in China and looks into how they distinguish themselves through cultural taste.

With the research question "how do highly educated Chinese born after the Consumer Revolution describe their cultural consumption preferences, and what boundary drawing strategies can be observed in their discourse on cultural taste?" and a sub-question is "to what extent are their practices of cultural distinction in line with the findings of American and European researches?", I collected data from 10 in-depth interviews, and looked into their diverse cultural consumption pattern.

Most of the participants can be defined as cultural omnivores. A variety of cultural resources like 'omnivorousness', 'openness', 'authenticity', 'uniqueness', and other forms of cultural capital can be observed in young highly educated Chinese' discourse on cultural taste. These cultural resources they use can generally be linked to previous western scholars' findings, but some particular variation can still be observed in the context of China.

KEYWORDS: Cultural capital, Bourdieu, Cultural consumption, Distinction, Highly educated

Table of Content

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1. Introduction

Research into cultural consumption in China has just started in recent years. Prior to Chinese economic reform, cultural consumption was very limited in China. Firstly, because a wide range of products (from daily necessities to cultural works) were under state control and secondly, because the economic conditions did not allow individuals to spend much on cultural products. However, since the final establishment of the Socialist Market Economy model in 1993, Chinese people's consumption patterns have changed dramatically (Mao & Sun, 2016). Cultural consumer goods mostly rely on the free market, which allows people to have more autonomy in their cultural consumption (Lu, 2017; Liu 2003). Davis (2000) calls this change Consumer Revolution. Further supported by the integration of Chinese society into the global system, the market for art and culture is expanding, with 'culture' being seen as the 'soft power' of the People's Republic of China (Hu, 2007).

As cultural consumption became an important force in economic development, it received ever-increasing attention since the Consumer Revolution. However, the issue of cultural consumption in China is still under-researched. Many scholars tend to use 'international experience' to analyze China's cultural consumption, rather than the specific situation of Chinese residents. As the cultural consumption market has further developed in recent years, the 'international experience' is not found to be applicable to China's cultural market (Mao & Sun, 2016). Therefore, under the background of the lack of research concerning cultural consumption in China, I thus wanted to deepen the understanding of the cultural consumption pattern and cultural taste of Chinese who have received higher education and were born after the Consumer Revolution.

Since Pierre Bourdieu (1984) pointed out the relation between cultural taste and social status, the academic discussion centered around this topic seems never ending. While there has been a large quantity of literature studying people's cultural capital and cultural taste in American and European society, there is little relevant research on this topic in China. Although some scholars investigated consumption of Chinese citizens after 1985, they did not cover cultural consumption in much detail. Some of the research has suggested that education is one of the most important factors in determining cultural taste and cultural consumption preferences (Wang, Davis, & Bian, 2006). But most studies

focused on the relationship between social status and material consumption (Luo and Zhang, 2001; Ji, 2010; Jiang, 2010). As mentioned in previous paragraphs, existing literatures on cultural consumption and cultural taste are rare in China, with most of the literatures failing to address the function of cultural taste as a means of drawing social boundaries with other groups (see Wang, Davis, & Bian, 2006; Yu, 2014; Liu, 2003). And according to the research conducted by CASS (Chinese Academy of Social Science), the number of highly educated people shows sustainable growth since 1982. The young generation, who were born after Chinese economic reform, have become the main force in the current cultural consumer market, but existing literatures on Chinese college student's cultural consumption pattern do not explore its connection with social boundaries in their discourse of cultural taste (e.g. Ban, 2009; Chen & Ouyang, 2011). So, my research question - "how do highly educated Chinese people born after the Consumer Revolution describe their cultural consumption preferences, and what boundary drawing strategies can be observed in their discourse on cultural taste?" and "to what extent are their practices of cultural distinction in line with the findings of American and European researches?" - are both important and novel.

Based on studies by Bourdieu (1984), and Peterson and Kern (1996), and other subsequent research on cultural consumption and distinction, this thesis investigates the increasingly diverse cultural consumption of well-educated young Chinese and discusses the possible variation of Western theories of cultural taste and distinction in a Chinese context. Using a qualitative research methodology, I conducted in-depth interviews with 10 highly educated Chinese who were born during the culmination of Consumer Revolution, i.e. 1990s. I tried to find out what they consider relevant or less relevant to good cultural items and legitimate taste. What does cultural taste mean to them? How do they describe their and other's taste of arts and culture? And what forms of cultural capital can be found in their distinction making strategies?

2. Theory and Previous Research

2.1 Creating Distinction: Social Boundaries and Cultural Taste

Social boundaries are social differences manifested in unequal access to, and distribution of, resources and social opportunities. They categorize objects, people and practices through social actors. Boundaries also separate people into different groups and generate a feeling of similarity and group membership (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). They are an essential medium through which individuals acquire status, monopolize resources, or legitimize social advantages (Alexander, 2003, p. 226). In this way, boundaries not only create groups but also produce social inequality. Boundaries exist in both material and symbolic form, and this thesis is concerned with the latter, more specifically, the cultural taste.

Earlier studies focused on art and culture themselves pointed out there are high and low form of art and culture. For example, Gans (1982) claims high art can bring abundant aesthetic experience whereas low culture merely entertains people.

Later studies connected artistic taste and consumption with markers of class (e.g. DiMaggio and Useem, 1978; Bourdieu, 1984) and "a means of establishing social membership and constructing and perpetuating social networks that provide access to material and symbolic goods" (DiMaggio & Ostrower, 1990, p.755). In his work, *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) suggests the relations among three concepts: 'capital', 'habitus' and 'field', which have been his most influential contributions to the sociological toolkit. As Wright (2015) summarizes, cultural taste is "shaped by the social space in which you are situated (field) and the combination of types of resources (capital) and inherited dispositions which you possess (habitus)" (p. 91).

To be specific, Bourdieu believes that just as social groups vary in the amount of economic capital, they also vary in the amount of their cultural capital. Cultural capital, according to Bourdieu, is a currency based on taste. It can be inherited from and influenced by habitus and field such as family and the amount of schooling. Cultural capital can contain a high degree of sophistication about legitimate art and culture, and

professional know-how in appreciating legitimate art and culture. For example, an artwork can only be appreciated by those who have a knowledge base about art and culture. A person who lacks cultural capital can feel lost in a chaos of colors and lines.

Drawing on cultural capital and social classes, Bourdieu roughly distinguished three profiles of taste which are ranked along a continuum of high to low. Firstly, the legitimate taste, i.e. the taste for high culture and cultural canon, Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, as an illustration. Legitimate taste is in tandem with the dominant classes that are richest in cultural capital in most cases. Secondly, the Middle-brow taste, which brings together the minor works of the major arts, such as Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. This kind of taste is more common in the middle classes than working classes. Finally, the popular taste. This taste involves works which are "totally devoid of artistic ambition or "pretension" (Bourdieu, 1984, p.16) as well as classical works devalued by popularization such as Strauss 's *Blue Danube*. Popular taste is most frequent among working classes who hold less cultural capital.

Bourdieu believes taste is one of the most vital stakes in the struggles fought in the field of the dominant class (Bourdieu, 1984, p.11). Upper classes legitimize their own taste by declaring their culture is superior to those of lower classes. By doing this, they are able to recognize other members via taste, while distinguishing themselves from lower class people who have popular taste. And because the upper class tends to be in positions of power in the education system, they can reinforce the legitimacy of their taste by structuring schools and other institutions. In this way, the dominant groups maintain an invisible boundary between themselves and lower classes, and perpetuate class distinction intergenerationally.

Additionally, Bourdieu (1984) especially points out that distinction can also be found in two ways of organizing cultural production. According to Bourdieu, the field of artistic production is organized around autonomous pole and heteronomous pole. The autonomous pole stands for those who devote themselves to artistic production for the sake of art itself, while the heteronomous pole measures cultural production by commercial success.

Bourdieu's initial work has been extremely influential and received a large number of approvals as well as criticisms. Lamont (1992) for example, studied upper-middle-class men in four cities, and found that Bourdieu's theories only apply to Paris but no other cities. She discovered that compared with French upper-middle class, their American

counterpart had broader cultural repertoires and drew weaker boundaries between themselves and lower classes. Also, DiMaggio and Ostrower (1990) proposed that the applicability of the concept of cultural capital in multicultural America must be refined since Bourdieu's theory was developed in historically monocultural France.

Based on America's context, subsequent researchers provide a series of alternative theories about distinction and cultural consumption. For instance, the homology of highbrow cultural taste and higher social class has been questioned by Peterson and his colleagues (Peterson, 1992; Peterson & Simkus, 1992; Peterson & Kern, 1996). Peterson and Simkus (1992) found that participants from higher classes enjoyed not only highbrow culture but also popular culture which is traditionally regarded as the low culture. And the range of music style which higher classes enjoyed was larger than those from lower classes. As Peterson (1992) puts it, "occupational groups at the top are much more likely to prefer non-elite musical and artistic genre than those in low-status occupation groups" (p. 249). Therefore, they demonstrated that, at least in America, the distinction based on high and low taste should be replaced by "omnivorous" and "univorous" taste.

Omnivores consume various cultural forms, including high and popular culture, and participate more in cultural events, while univores, who have a lower socio-economic status, tend to specialize in a narrow range of popular culture. Omnivore has taken over the prestige status of highbrow snobs who specialized in high art and culture (Peterson & Kern, 1996). The theories about omnivorous taste have been subsequently supported by the wider range of studies around the world. For example, higher-status groups in the Netherlands tend to have more omnivorous musical taste (Van Eijck, 2001). Sintas and Álvarez (2002) have found Spanish cultural omnivores are usually associated with the highest social class and level of education.

DiMaggio (1987), similarly, noted the larger cultural repertoires of the privileged middle and upper classes who use different cultural repertoires in different situations. He also claimed cultural boundaries of different social groups in the United States were being eroded because of the increasing social and geographic mobility in its society. So, people with higher socio-economic status who put themselves in a variety of settings need to fulfill a variety of social roles. Specifically, high art is used as a strategy to identify an individual's status in the social hierarchy, and popular arts is used as a bridging strategy, enabling them to connect with people from other social classes.

However, even though most scholars acknowledge that although highbrow cultural taste could not be identified as a way of rendering social prestige, this does not mean cultural boundaries have been eroding (Prieur & Savage, 2013). In fact, some researchers have found that the upper middle class with higher education still prefer legitimized culture (e.g. Warde, Wright, & Gayo-Cal, 2008; Pedersen, Jarness, & Flemmen, 2018). Using an innovative approach, Bryson (1996) contributed to exploring cultural capital used for creating distinction. She focused on musical dislike, i.e. cultural exclusion and intolerance, and found that lower education significantly decreases exclusiveness in musical taste, respondents with higher levels of education are evidently more omnivorous in their cultural choices. But unlike DiMaggio's arguments about the erosion of cultural boundaries, Bryson didn't think cultural capital has lost its importance. The forms that higher status people disliked the most were precisely the favorite forms of those that are lower status, so Bryson believes this indicates the exclusion based on social class, that is, upper-middle classes distinguish themselves from lower classes via disliking the music favored by the latter. Moreover, Bryson coined another arts-related cultural capital. She argues that "cultural breadth", or "cultural tolerance" may itself be a source of cultural capital. If what Bourdieu has found could be called "high-cultural capital", then what she has found could be termed as "multicultural capitalism". Ollivier (2008) further points out that 'openness', 'tolerance' and 'flexibility' are highly valued among upper middle class and can be used as cultural resources to render prestige.

By examining subcultures revolving around dance clubs and raves in Britain, Tornton (1995) found the participants in these subcultures tended to distinguish themselves from other young people using what she termed as 'subcultural capital'. Subcultural capital consists of artefacts and knowledge which are recognized as tasteful and sophisticated in the discourse of a specific subculture. Subcultural capital holders tend to distance themselves with mainstream and attempt to avoid popularization. And like cultural capital, subcultural capital allows the holder to regard him or herself as distinguished.

Daenekindt and Roose (2014), from another perspective, focused on the style of consumption. They found that the different taste profiles of an art museum's visitors do not strongly differ from one another in terms of social position. thus, taste is not – or only to a small degree – associated with distinction in at least the context of museums. They noted that "Distinction by means of 'what' is being preferred is somehow 'exhausted',

'worn out' in a context where all participants express appreciation for legitimate cultural products" (p. 17). In such settings, distinction is more grounded in the style of consumption and function as status markers.

Taylor (2009) innovatively introduces a 'logic of trendiness' and claims social prestige can be gained by being up-to-date and well informed about the ever-changing cultural trends. However, chasing trends is meanwhile criticized as being fake or shallow because such taste indicates a lack of authenticity (Michael, 2017). In this way, 'authenticity' which represents something true and original (Peterson, 1997; Zukin, 2008) can be used as a status marker to distinguish from something fake and pretentious (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Furthermore, authenticity is found in two different types: 'romantic notion of authenticity' embraces nature and pre-industrial time (Gioia, 2009), whilst the 'modernist notion of authenticity' demands originality, innovation and breaking the tradition (Keightley, 2001).

Deriving from the second type of authenticity, 'uniqueness', which serves as an evidence of something 'truly innovative', is found to be a way of expressing distinction by Michael (2017). However, the connection between 'uniqueness' and alternative cultural taste is still an open question. Alternative - mainstream is claimed as a boundary existing in the creative industry by Crewe et al. (2003). They stress the 'alternative' is in fact constructed via terms which have their mirror opposite in an 'imagined mainstream'. In this way, "alternative-as-imagined is open and porous to the mainstream-as-imagined" (p. 78).

Increasingly, scholars worldwide have become interested in new forms of cultural distinction in recent years, with some arguing that the superiority of omnivorous taste is being replaced by the possession of "emerging cultural capital" (Friedman, Savage, Hanquinet, & Miles, 2015). Prieur and Savage (2013), for example, claim that cultural production nowadays has gone through enormous changes and highly reflected cultural consumption. These changes may result in the expression of distinction that puts less emphasis on the choices of objects but more on the attitudes towards the objects. A "knowing mode of appropriation of culture" (Prieur & Savage, 2013), which refers to an open, but distanced, verbalized, and ironic attitude towards various culture, can be a marker of distinction. With such attitudes, privileged people could consume lowbrow culture whilst keeping themselves from "bad taste". They also suggest the "cosmopolitan cultural capital" could be another important status marker in today's society. Opposite to

9

those who are specialized in local or national culture, individuals with cosmopolitan cultural capital may speak foreign languages or have access to information overseas, they orient themselves globally in musical taste, TV-preferences, and even food consumption. Therefore, cosmopolitan capital refers to not only a higher degree of cultural resources and wider range of knowledge (Wright, 2015), but also a "capacity to stand outside one's own national frame of reference" (Prieur & Savage, 2013, p. 259).

Because of Bourdieu's influence, most of the studies that discuss the issues of distinction focus on social class. But some scholars also provide clues about distinction practices based on age, gender or race. For instance, Hebdige (1979) suggest that the younger generation would use rock music to distinguish themselves with the elder generation. Radway (1984) found that the "women's culture" such as romance novels are devalued with respect to cultural genres preferred by men. And Peterson and Simkus (1992) discovered that the music genres historically created by black musicians were more preferred by black respondents. However, tastes based on age, gender and race boundaries have not been studied in a systematic way like taste based on social class has been. But it is undeniable that such demographic factors will have an impact on cultural taste and most scholars would take them into account when studying individuals' expression of distinction (Alexander, 2003).

2.2 In the Context of China

Though the theoretical framework of this study is mostly based on western sociological studies, I consider the possible variations of these theories in China's context when using them to analyze interviewee's answers. This section will introduce the existing research on related topics and what could help Chinese sociologists apply western theories to the context of China.

2.2.1 Insufficient Understanding of Cultural Consumption in China

While there has been a large amount of research on cultural capital and distinction in American and European societies, there are few relevant studies on cultural consumption

in China.

The political and economic environment has resulted in a limited consumption of arts and culture among Chinese people in last century. After the establishment of People's Republic of China in 1949, most cultural institutions and publishers were fully invested by the government, so the primary role of cultural production was a means of political propaganda. Cultural production is an integral part of ideological production, while consumption is a process of receiving political and ideological education. At that time, cultural production as well as consumption in China was highly restricted and even reached the lowest point during the *Cultural Revolution*, i.e., 1966 to 1976 (Shan, 2013).

Around the 1980s, Chinese Economic Reform begun to change people's cultural consumption pattern. The general trend was that the government would no longer provide all the cultural products and services, and ideology would no longer monopolize people's cultural consumption. Though the political function of culture is still maintained in the market due to the strict censorship laws, its economic and social attributes have started to be recognized (Shan, 2014). In 2000, the concept of 'cultural industry' was first proposed in government documents, and after 10 years, the government proposed the goal of "promoting cultural industry to become the pillar industry of national economy" (Ai, Gao & Ji 2014). Under these circumstances, the topic of the cultural consumption pattern of Chinese residents saw an increase in academic attention in the field of economics. Several economists have summarized the features of Chinese residents' preference of cultural consumption from a macro perspective (e.g., Zou, 2007; Wang, 2010; Li, 2013;). For example, some scholars claim that Chinese people's cultural consumption is still at a relatively low level, because most residents have just walked out of poverty and have not changed their consumption habits (Zhang, 2010). Some believe that due to the unbalanced economic development, there are great differences in the levels and tastes of cultural consumption among Chinese residents (Shan, 2013; Mao & Sun, 2016).

Different from the exploration in the field of economics, the sociological significance of cultural consumption and cultural taste has not received such increased attention. In existing literature, several sociologists of culture in China have introduced Bourdieu's, Peterson's and other's theoretical frameworks to the context of China to study Chinese residents' cultural consumption preferences (see Liu, 2003; Wang, 2016; Yu, 2014a). Yu (2014b), for instance, succinctly explains the primary theories of distinction

(Bourdieu,1984) and the follow-up development such as cultural omnivores (Peterson & Kern, 1996), and suggests the cultural taste of Chinese residents needs more attention. Yu (2014b) also believes that using previous Euro-American theoretical frameworks can be a great guidance for the exploration of people's cultural taste in China, because, compared with Chinese society, the academic exploration of cultural consumption and social class in the Euro-American context are relatively systematic and mature.

2.2.2 Applied to the Context of China

While many authors have suggested that Bourdieu's idea is context specific and apply only to cities like Paris (see, Lamont 1992), the theory about elites' omnivorous taste have also been criticized as a time-specific theory. Rossman and Peterson (2015) found that the "omnivorousness" might be a fad peaking around 1992 and questioned the universality of the theories of omnivorous taste. Since those theories appear to be context and time specific, further research should take considerable cautions when applying them to another situation.

In fact, several authors in China have realized the importance of discussing the applicability of western theories.

Sociology was banned by communist authorities as a bourgeois pseudoscience[1]. After being abandoned in 1953, the status of sociology as an independent and important discipline was not widely acknowledged in China's society until late 1970s (Bian & Zhang, 2008). Since then, simply transplanting western sociological theories has become a common problem in Chinese sociological studies (Chen, 2019). The society of contemporary China has undergone social transformation and reconstruction in the last three decades, it is far from sufficienct for researchers to understand it by directly transplanting western social theoretical frameworks (Wang, 2015). For instance, Mao and Sun (2016) found the 'international experience', which had been cited by many Chinese scholars, is in fact not applicable in the context of China's cultural market. According to the 'international experience', the per capita GNP of $3,000 would lead to a surge in cultural consumption. But in 2008, cultural consumption did not show an explosive growth when China's per capita GNP exceeded $3,000. This may partly illustrate that Chinese residents' preference of cultural consumption can be different from western

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[1] Bourgeois pseudoscience was a term of condemnation in the Soviet Union and China for certain scientific disciplines that were deemed unacceptable from an ideological point of view.

residents. Other authors also claim Chinese researchers should not overrate the universality of some theories in different cultural contexts, otherwise such mistakes would gradually lead to the marginalization of sociology in Chinese society (Liu & Lin, 2007).

Wang (2015) emphasizes the continuity of traditional Chinese culture in contemporary China should be taken into account. However, there has been a lack of continuity in traditional Chinese culture over the past 100 years due to obstruction by the political and economic environment. During two major cultural movements in the 20th century - the May Fourth Movement and the Cultural Revolution– traditional Chinese culture was considered to be abandoned. And meanwhile, the development of contemporary cultural industry was not able to develop because of the same reason. So, the cultural development of the whole country was in a situation of stagnation or even regression (Dou & Liu, 2010). After the Chinese economic reform, traditional Chinese culture has been re-supported by the government of the People's Republic of China (Gu, 1999). The importance of cultural industry started to be realized, to protect traditional and classical Chinese culture, the Chinese government suggested that people should understand the essence of traditional Chinese culture. However, it is worth noting that Beijing Opera, which has been described as the essence of traditional Chinese art, has still declined after the Chinese economic reform (Ma, 1996).

Recently, several forms of traditional Chinese culture such as Xiangsheng (a kind of traditional Chinese performance, similar to a talk show) have become increasingly popular by combining popular culture with traditional Chinese culture. The different situation of Beijing Opera that represents elegant traditional Chinese culture and Xiangsheng which is seen as folk traditional Chinese culture shows that contemporary Chinese people prefer traditional folk art that is easy to understand. A Xiangsheng master, Degang Guo, explained why Kun Opera (one of the oldest forms of Chinese opera) has almost disappeared from contemporary society. As he pointed out, the lyrics of Kun Opera are derived from complex ancient Chinese poems that, in ancient China, could only be understood and appreciated by intellectuals. As a result, few people can understand Kun Opera now and the lack of audience threatens the disappearance of Kun Opera (Ibid.).

This evidence indicates that folk traditional Chinese culture that is easy to understand can still be widely accepted nowadays in China (Bo, 2010). At the same time, those elegant traditional Chinese arts seem unsustainable today. Even certain forms of

traditional Chinese culture have received more attention nowadays, there are only a few literatures focused on the role of traditional Chinese cultural form in contemporary people's cultural consumption patterns from the perspective of sociology. Thus, I was curious about and aimed to explore the position of traditional Chinese culture in my interviewees' discourse.

2.2.3 The Consumer Revolution and Previous Research

Davis claimed that, since the 1978 institution of market reform by Deng Xiaoping, Chinese people's consumption patterns had shown dramatic changes. But it was not until the 1990s that an explosion of consumption practices really began to transform Chinese urban social and economic life (Davis, 2000). Davis calls this period of enormous change 'The Consumer Revolution'. Since then, the consumption of Chinese citizens begun to receive increasing academic interest. From previous studies, researchers found a strong connection between the consumption preference of Chinese urban residents and their social status. For example, Luo and Zhang (2001) found that in Chinese urban families, the consumer preference for daily necessities, culture, and children's education reflected their social class and divided people into different social groups.

Jiang (2010) identified five rankings of social status in urban China based on characteristics of consumption. With regards to consumer preference for recreation and entertainment, he found that the upper class were keen on golf and entered exclusive clubs and bars whilst the upper middle class often go to art galleries, museums and other public cultural places. The middle class like to read professional books and travel. The lower-middle-class regard shopping as an important recreational project and the lower class's entertainment is dominated by watching TV (Ji, 2010). In contemporary China, the consumer goods and consumption behaviors have become status markers which can provide an internal sense of social solidarity within one's own social groups as well as a means of expressing difference from others (Li, 2007). But in general, these investigations mostly looked into material consumption and overlooked cultural consumption.

The scarce literature on art and cultural consumption preference in China mainly addressed it as a phenomenon which can serve as an evidence of social inequality in society, rather than using cultural taste itself as a means of drawing distinction (see Wang, Davis, & Bian, 2006; Yu, 2014; Liu, 2003). For instance, by conducting a survey about preferences in book reading (choice of genre and authors) among different social classes

(measured by occupation) in urban China, Wang et al. (2006) suggest that compared with 'income', 'education' is the dominant predictor of uneven distribution of cultural capital in urban China, powerfully driving cultural taste and cultural consumption.

With the further deepening of the Consumer Revolution, the needs of cultural consumption continues to expand. According to the cultural consumption annual report issued by Renmin University of China in 2013, the potential scale of China's cultural consumption is about 4.7 trillion RMB (Around 607 billion Euro) (Li, 2013). The insufficient academic understanding of Chinese citizens' cultural consumption has been highlighted in this situation. Lyu and Xu (2008) investigated Chinese college students' various cultural consumption. They found that young, highly educated Chinese would use the preference of fashion and popular music as a means of self-expression and would present their ideal self-image to peers through consuming certain cultural symbols. Their findings have inspired subsequent research into young Chinese people's cultural consumption (e.g. Ban, 2009; Chen & Ouyang, 2011), but they mainly stayed within the field of psychology (such as the phenomenon of conscious consumption) whilst failing to address the sociology of arts and culture.

2.2.4 Young, Highly Educated Chinese

Taste and cultural capital can serve as a status marker, especially for elite groups (Alexander, 2003). Van Eijck (2011) proved that education is the most pivotal determinant of a person's cultural participation and appreciation for different forms of art. Recent discussions centered around tastes and distinction of well-educated elites have several strands. Some believe that highbrow culture and its associated markers of distinction are still prevalent among upper-middle class (Pedersen, Jarness, & Flemmen, 2018), While some researchers suggest elites tend to connect cultural capital with social capital and point out that cultural capital, such as symbolic mastery, is more likely to be a kind of useful skill at the top of the labor market, rather than a social status marker for them, so the cultural capital might be losing its currency among elites nowadays (Michael, 2017).

Some Chinese scholars have also proved that educational attainment is the strongest predictor of cultural participation and taste (e.g. Lyu & Xu, 2009; Meng, 2014; Wang, Davis, & Bian, 2006). For example, using data collected by survey research, Meng (2014) found Chinese college students' musical tastes are influenced by family background and the

quality of education. Students from wealthier families, or those studying in 'National Key Universities' [2] are more likely to prefer western musical genres. Meng combined Bourdieu's theory (1984) with her results and found a connection between dominant student groups and western culture. However, she does not consider the theories about other forms of cultural capital that were developed after Bourdieu - cosmopolitan capital (Prieur & Savage, 2013), for instance.

Additionally, economists also found that a higher education level is usually linked to stronger willingness to consume cultural goods (Zhang, 2010; Ai, Gao & Ji 2014). According to the Cultural Consumption Annual Report (2017) issued by Renmin University of China, the cultural consumption demand of people born in the 1990s is the strongest (China Economic Net., 2018), this may due to the fact they were born and brought up during the rapidly rising stage of the Consumer Revolution.

In the near future, we might say that highly educated people born during this period of the Consumer Revolution will become the main consumer force in the domestic cultural market. Therefore, this research will focus on young, well-educated Chinese who were born during the 1990s, and investigate their increasingly diverse cultural consumption pattern, cultural taste, and strategies to distinguish themselves.

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[2] This term referred to 39 universities recognized as prestigious and which received a high level of support from the central government of the People's Republic of China since 1954. As of 2017, the term is no longer in official use.

3 Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

My research question is "how do highly educated Chinese born after the Consumer Revolution describe their cultural consumption preferences, and what boundary drawing strategies can be observed in their discourse on cultural taste?" with one sub-question, which is "to what extent are their practices of cultural distinction in line with the findings of American and European research?" This research can be a complement to previous studies that focus on the cultural consumption patterns of Chinese citizens. The data of related existing studies are mainly gathered through questionnaires and surveys (e.g. Liu, 2003; Wang, Davis, & Bian, 2006; Yu, 2014). Previous research has provided considerable insight into the general trends of cultural consumption, but this research aims to expand the knowledge on the specific cultural consumption of well-educated, young Chinese and the concrete strategies they use to express distinction. In order to reach my goals through the eyes of participants themselves, a qualitative research method, specifically, semi-structured interviews, was used as individual's views, opinions, meanings and behaviors are being studied (Bryman, 2012, Gilbert, 2008).

Post-Bourdieu research on tastes for art among the urban elites have already proved the advantages of qualitative research methods (e.g. Halle, 1993; Lamont, 1992). Through semi-structured interviews, researchers are able to explore the meaning behind the preferences and practices of more limited populations in a more discursive way (Wright, 2015). An interview guide was used to ensure the interviews would be going in the right direction (Gilbert, 2008). Every participant has allowed me to record the conversation before the interview started. Each interview started with a brief introduction to the research, whereby I would also warm up the atmosphere to help interviewees prepare themselves for the follow-up conversation. I tried to structure the interview questions in a way that avoids the potential influence of my subjectivism. I also tried to leave room for respondents' personal opinions and stay responsive to different situations during the interviews.

The research aims to answer questions such as, 'what are their preferences of cultural consumption?', 'how do they participate in art and cultural activities?', 'how do

they describe their taste of arts and culture?' and 'what does taste mean to them?' This research has not only attempted to understand what well-educated young Chinese prefer to consume in the cultural market, but also the cultural sociological meaning behind their cultural taste.

For this research, 10 semi-structured interviews, with around an hour duration for each, were conducted. Since the subject of analysis are young, highly educated Chinese and I was not in China during the research period, 7 of the interviews were conducted online via Wechat. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. In order to gain more contextualized information, the interview language was Chinese, but the quotes in the analysis section have been translated in English.

3.2 Sampling and Operationalization

Criterion sampling method was applied during the recruitment of interviewees. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), "criterion samples derived from commonly understood definitions of the case" (p.112). There were two main criteria I have taken into account in order to find target interviewees. Firstly, the participants should be born after or during the rising stage of the Consumer Revolution, i.e., the 1990s (Davis, 2000). Secondly, the participants should have received a higher education, i.e., bachelor's degree and above.

To approach highly educated young Chinese, I looked into the two aforementioned criteria and used my personal network to establish the first connection. After the initial contact, snowball sampling strategy was also applied to connect with other participants (Bryman, 2012).

I found 6 interviewees via social platforms, initially several influencers on China's biggest social platform Weibo. These influencers post professional or academic content which usually attracts people who are more likely to be highly educated. On Weibo, I can easily check their personal page which may contain personal information (such as graduation school and date of birth). I then sent messages to them, introducing my research subject and asking if they could accept an interview. Fortunately, most of them were willing to talk with me.

My sample contains 10 people, 5 females and 5 males, since I wanted to achieve a balanced gender ratio in this study. Some of them have graduated from, or are still

studying, in China's top universities, whilst some of them have overseas educational backgrounds (see appendix 1). To protect the privacy of my respondents, I use pseudonyms in this research.

The interview guide (see appendix 2) was structured with a variety of open questions in order to collect fruitful data about an individual's opinions and feelings. It contains a series of questions designed to operationalize certain concepts to make them concrete and measurable.

According to existing literature, taste can be routinely conceptualized and operationalized in its objectified form, i.e. in an individual's preferences for particular cultural objects (Holt, 1998). To explore the cultural taste of well-educated young Chinese, I asked questions such as what their favorite musical genres are and why, in order to find out the features of cultural items they value. As Bryson (1996) has found that cultural exclusion and intolerance can be used for creating distinction, I also tried to find their distinction making strategies by asking what kind of cultural goods they dislike.

Previous research on taste mostly focuses on participants' taste towards music or art, but the concept 'cultural taste' used in this research is not restricted to activities of high forms of art like visiting museum or going to theatre, because traditional high cultural activities have been declining in power in people's life (Van Eijck & Knulst, 2005). Considering the emerging forms of cultural capital measured by Savage et al. (2013) contains participants' preference towards media consumption like videogames, I asked interviewees' preference and taste towards movies, books, TV series, anime, comics and videogames to better understand their cultural taste pattern.

To further explore what forms of cultural capital would emerge from interviewees' discourse, I asked what taste means to them, and when do they feel cultural taste is important. I also tried to pinpoint interviewees' strategies of distinction making by asking them describe the similarities and differences between their and other's taste.

Additionally, to understand the position of traditional Chinese culture in participants' discourse of Cultural consumption, I asked my interviewees if they would consume traditional Chinese cultural forms and what cultural items they like to consume and why. To explore if there is any special status for traditional Chinese culture in their cultural consumption, I also asked them the differences between cultural items produced in ancient China and contemporary China or Western societies.

to answer my sub-question "to what extent are the cultural distinction practices of

young highly educated Chinese in line with the findings of American and European researches?", I tried to discover the possible differences with previous western studies from my interviewees' means of expressing distinction.

I firstly addressed this question on traditional Chinese culture. On the one hand, Wang (2015) has emphasized that the problem of continuity of traditional Chinese culture in contemporary China should not be neglected when conducting sociological research in China's context. On the other hand, this cultural form is particular to China's society, so something interesting which are different from previous western theories may be found on interviewees' the discourse of traditional Chinese culture. Specifically, to understand the position of traditional Chinese culture in participants' discourse of Cultural consumption, I asked my interviewees if they would consume traditional Chinese cultural forms and what cultural items they like to consume and why. To explore if there is any special status for traditional Chinese culture in participants' cultural consumption, I also asked them the differences between cultural items produced in ancient China and contemporary China or Western societies.

Secondly, as I have explained in previous chapter, there was a significant disruption in development track of cultural industry in China, so the how people accept different forms of cultural items as well as the situation of cultural production in China's cultural market both worth special attention. Therefore, to recognize the possible nuances, I paid attention to how a certain form of cultural capital appears in my interviewees' discourse. I tried to find out would they regard a certain form of cultural resource for the same reasons as the participants of western studies. So, during the interviews, when I recognized a form of resource was rendering prestige for them in their answers, I would ask why they value it or when they thought it was important. I also tried to pinpoint the differences on the relationships among diverse forms of cultural capital like authenticity, uniqueness, autonomous, etc. In order to do so, I created networks for the reasons of interviewees liking or disliking some cultural items on Atlas.ti to disentangle the cultural capitals and cultural intolerance emerged in participants' discourses, as well as examine the potential connections among them.

3.3 Analyzing the data

After collecting a rich and detailed accumulation of answers, I transcribed the interviews and began to analyze the data. The thematic analysis approach has then been used (Nowell, Norris, White, Moules, 2017, p.1). It is a "presentation of an auditable decision trail, guiding interpreting and representing textual data" (p.1). It is an effective way for researchers to identify key features from the large qualitative data collection. It helped me to gain detailed information about the profiles of my interviewee's cultural consumption preference, and allowed me to catch the meaning of their cultural consumption behaviors from their personal opinions and feelings.

I started my analysis with open coding, which is the primary stage of qualitative interviews (Gilbert, 2008). I used the software Atlas-ti to help me with this process. Specifically, I read and re-read the transcriptions to familiarize myself with the data, and then dismantled the text and categorized the segments of data (Charmaz, 2006). I gave labels to interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion and generated initial codes.

After the first layer of open coding, the axial coding brought me to a second layer of coding which was more specific and focused. For instance, when a data fragment was coded as "dislike domestic cultural products", another was coded as "prefer cultural products from overseas", so I linked these two codes and created a theme which was "cultural capital: cosmopolitanism". In order to identify the relationships between codes and categories, I also created networks in Atlas.ti. to examine the possible relations with different themes.

4. Findings and Results

4.1 What Constitutes Good Cultural Items and a Legitimate Cultural Taste?

To understand the image of good and bad cultural products from my interviewee's point of view, I asked their preference within different kinds of cultural forms such as music, arts, books, film and television works, and other media consumption (such as video games) during the interviews. In this section, I will mostly focus on music which all the interviewees engage. By illustrating the cultural products that they like and dislike, I will introduce some common themes in their answers.

When talking about music, most of my interviewees have trouble naming 4 or more musical genres. They suggest they do not have much knowledge about musical genres. They tend to use labels such as 'with or without lyrics', 'fast or slow', 'domestic music or not' to distinguish the music they listen to. Some of them were fond of and able to name different type of music such as pop, rock, jazz, and classical music.

5 of my interviewees suggest they enjoy listening to classical music, and two of them suggested classical music is their favorite. Yao (male, 25) is currently a master student in applied mathematics. When asked what kind of music he likes the most, he answers:

> *I used to learn piano, so I prefer classical music … my playlist is full of piano sonatas and symphonies … I also listen to pop, or some movie soundtracks, but mostly classical music.*

Yao says he still plays the piano every week for leisure. The music he plays the most are Bach's Two- and Three-Part Inventions. "I love polyphony", he says, "this type of musical texture is really beautiful." Yao's musical preference can be categorized as traditional highbrow culture (Bourdieu, 1984). When asked why he likes classical music, he explains:

> *It is more like a habit, I think. Because I was learning it, and though my parents are not that into classical music, they still bought many CDs of classical music and played them every night … you know, maybe just to let me get interested in classical music or something They also took me to many symphony concerts when I*

was kid ... and when you get used to the classical music, you will find some so-called
popular are simple and quite boring.

According to Yao's answers, family and growth environment which refer to field, capital and habitus (Bourdieu, Ibid.) have determined his current musical preference of classical music. Che (male, 26) is another participant that regards classical music as their favorite musical genre. He explains his reason for loving Orchestra:

On the one hand, it makes me feel peaceful to some extent, when I am distracted
sometimes. On the other hand, I play instrument myself, I play Saxophone quite
well, and I was a member of my university's symphonic band. So, I am just
interested in this kind of music.

Yao and Che's statements indicate that their preference towards classical music was developed form the music training they have received, which means such preference is mainly constructed and internalized by their habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). However, different from Yao and Che, Li (female, 23) now studying in New York, explains how she first became interested in classical music because of a TV show:

Actually I just started to love classical music. I mean, I used to occasionally listen to
classical music. But now, I listen every day ... It is because I watched a show named
'Super-Vocal[3]', and I got more exposed to classical music, and then I found I
enjoyed myself listening to operas and musicals. I watched several musicals and
operas after I came to New York city ... at the beginning, I preferred musicals than
opera, but recently I am stuck on Mozart, so I go to the opera house more now,
almost every month.

Interestingly, Yao is the only one who directly links the musical genre 'classical music' with the concept of 'classic music'. In western societies, the term 'classical music' usually means a musical genre which refers to the music written by old music masters such as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. But in this research, most participants divide the 'western classical music' with the term 'classic music'. When asked what kind of music can be described as 'classic music' in their mind, they think neither 'western classical music' nor 'Classical Chinese music' is equivalent to 'classic music'. They usually associate this word

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[3] 'Super-Vocal' is a singing competition show. All the competitors are graduates or students of Opera/Musical performance in well-known music academy. The song selection has a wide variety from operas to musical songs.

with some old and well-known popular songs with numerous cover versions. They believe 'classic' is used to refer to music of a very good quality which is worthy of thousands of people listening to or singing them again and again. The most significant difference is 'classical music' means a certain music genre, but 'classic music' mirrors the very common emotion of most people in certain times. Like Chen says, "it (classic music) does not have to be (western) classical music, it can be pop, it can be folk, it can be anything." Lu (female, 24), who currently works in Shanghai, has a similar answer:

> *… it feels like the word 'classic' has its features of times. I mean, each generation has its own classic music, and there must be a singer, or a tune that belong to a certain time period.*

And when being asked to give example of classic music in their mind, some of them mention British and American bands and singers such as The Beatles and Michael Jackson, but most of them name a number of well-known Chinese and Taiwanese pop singers in the 70s to 90s. Though these interviewees especially stress their preference in classical music, their approval of pop music indicates they are not likely to focus on merely highbrow culture. And their musical tastes contain both highbrow and lowbrow interests which could be described as omnivorous (Peterson, 1992). The discourse of omnivorousness and openness will be further addressed in later sections.

In general, there is little to indicate that my interviewees tend to use classical music as a means of distinction making, though some of them suggest they may associate classical music with more legitimate cultural taste. "I think people who like classical music must have a good musical taste", says Li, after that she adds: "though I know it is more like a stereotype than a fact."

All of the participants suggest they listen to pop music. Chen, for example, says he likes "Hong Kong's Cantonese pop" and "Japanese pop"; Che likes "older popular songs"; Cen (female, 24) is a master's student and loves "Euro-American Pop", while Ke (male, 26), who is now in the UK likes "American pop music from the 80-90s".

It seems that their preferences towards pop music are diverse and cover different time periods and musicians. However, a common thing is that all of the interviewees would like to distance themselves from Chinese pop music. When asked if they listen to Chinese pop music, most participants suggest they used to like Chinese pop music in their early teens. They believe previous Chinese pop music is much better than recent domestic

music. Li said she almost never listens to songs in Chinese now, she would only listen to several old Chinese pop songs when she is nostalgically remembering her childhood. Chen (male, 27) works as an accountant in Guangzhou and answered why he dislikes Chinese pop music:

> *… the themes (of Chinese pop songs) are always love affairs, relationships, romance, they are too narrow, simple, and naive for me.*

Meanwhile, Chen emphasized his interests towards Japanese music, because Japanese songs talk about passion and life and they can encourage him when he feels upset or stressed. Similarly, Cen also suggests her disapproval of domestic pop music. She explains the reason why she prefers Euro-American pop music:

> *… because of the melody, the rhythm, the lyrics, the themes, well, because of a lot of things. The general quality, I should say. They are just better.*

Such statements can be associated with cosmopolitan capital which represents that they have a higher degree of cultural resources and wider range of knowledge (Wright, 2015). Cosmopolitanism here becomes an elite position marker which helps them to draw boundaries between domestic pop music lovers who are local and parochial.

Another example is provided by Ke who stresses he likes the "classic rock music in the UK and US that published was last century", but hates "popular Chinese rock bands like MayDay[4]". He also gives his comment about domestic movies:

> *most Chinese movies, especially recently published ones, are in poor quality from my point of view. They have got boring stories, bad actors and actresses without professional performance, ridiculous scriptwriters and directors … I definitely admire those excellent films, but most of them, may be more than 4/5 good Chinese films I have watched are from Hong Kong and Taiwan … maybe those movies are mainly for teens or even younger audiences who are crazily into a certain actor/actress in the casting.*

Ke emphasizes he dislikes domestic movies because the movies themselves are of poor quality. Though he tries to create a distinction between him and Chinese audiences who like domestic movies, the boundaries he creates are mainly drawn on the problem of movie's quality instead of the country of production. So cosmopolitan capital may serve

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[4] a Taiwanese band focus on pop and rock music

as a supplementary form of cultural capital, but it is not the main resource in making distinctions in the case of Ke.

What's more, in the last excerpt, Ke mentioned that some audiences are crazy about certain actors and actresses, which can be associated with Che's and Shen's statement about 'Little Fresh Meat' and 'Data Traffic Star' [5]. In their discourse of cultural consumption, these two concepts are often used as examples of cultural products they dislike. Some of them clearly claim they dislike current mainstream music because it is taken up by these data traffic singers. For instance, Che answered when being asked to exemplify the music he dislikes:

> *… if I have to say one thing I hate, I would say I dislike those songs from "Little fresh meat" … from my point of view, I do not even want to call them singers. They are not doing music anyway, they are popular because of the fan Economy, not because their works are good. I mean their albums and movies are not worth such sales volume. I dislike their works, and I dislike this kind of system raised by the fan economy.*

Che's negative attitudes towards mainstream music is mainly because data traffic stars are gaining huge popularity and he thinks that this should not be the case. Similarly, Shen gives his opinions about mainstream music in China nowadays:

> **Shen**: *… look at what is listed in the current ranking of most popular music in China, do you ever listen to those songs? Cai Xukun[6], Wu Yifan[7], right? Their songs are most high-ranking and seem to be popular. But this mainstream is not real, it's fake … It's an illusion produced by the power of capital and profits. I hate the fake mainstream for sure, but for those real good pop music made by, for example Jay Chou, Eason Chan, etc., I accept.*

> **Interviewer**: *… Then what would be the main differences between the fake mainstream music and real good pop music?*

> **Shen**: *… The musicians are seriously taking responsibility for the music they created … But the fake mainstream, the music they make is obviously from a*

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[5]   In China, these two words refer to young singers or actors/actresses who are young and have a large number of fans under 25s. Their fans tend to idolize these stars and participate in different activities to support idols, so their movies and albums often receive high attention and sales.

[6]   a Chinese singer, dancer, rapper and songwriter.

[7]   a Chinese-Canadian actor, singer, and model.

standardized production line. They are the same in the nature, that's the fake

mainstream.

Shen's statement about the real and fake mainstream can be associated with the concept of 'authenticity'. Authenticity represents something true and original (Peterson, 1997; Zukin, 2008). It seems that Shen would like to use authenticity to draw boundaries with what he sees as fake mainstream. However, the 'authenticity' in Shen's answers is like neither the 'romantic notion of authenticity' which embraces pre-industrial time (Gioia, 2009), nor the 'modernist notion of authenticity' which demands originality and innovation (Keightley, 2001).

So, to find out what would be the particular form of 'authenticity' that Shen is seeking for, I asked him how would he discover new music. For more than half of the interviewees, the internet serves as an important way to find new cultural items. They share cultural interests on social media and discover music through the algorithm-based systems of online music streaming services. For example, Hai answers when being asked how she discovers new songs,

> *I just 'like' the songs, and the NetEase music[8] will recommend me songs based on*
> *these, and I find this system is really clever, it knows what I might like. And*
> *sometimes I find some songs from what my friends share on WeChat[9].*

Therefore, the 'authenticity', which refers to an 'independent personality', can demonstrate a higher status in Shen's discourse of musical taste. When asked if he would find music via algorithm-based system or social platform, he answers:

> *I think maybe because my personality is relatively independent, so I know exactly*
> *what I want and I can find the one I really want ... I think those who usually find*
> *music through social platform can be easily influenced by others ... Like those fans*
> *of Chinese Data traffic singers, they don't think about what are the force driving*
> *these singers. They simply accept what had been pushed in front of them, and don't*
> *think about the commercial force behind.*

Shen links 'authenticity' to independent personality which helps him make decisions through 'true-self' rather than anything else and uses it to make a distinction from people

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[8] one of the biggest music streaming services in China.
[9] a Chinese multi-purpose messaging and social media app.

who will easily lose their 'true-self' under commercial promotion. Here, Shen also stressed the negative effect that the economy has bought to the mainstream music's situation in China. It seems that Shen tends to be attracted by the 'autonomous' pole (Bourdieu, 1984). Similar answers can be found on Lu and Cen who also used 'Little fresh meat' and 'Data Traffic Star' to illustrate the music they dislike during the interviews. They seem to distance their cultural taste from those products that engage more in the 'heteronomous' side and achieve more commercial success.

Moreover, Shen gives his opinion about the fans of 'data traffic singers' as:

they really think those songs are good, or say if they have listened to other musicians' songs and still think their idols' songs are good, I have nothing to say, because everybody can have their own preference on music. But they just follow what capital wants them follow, so this shity music can receive such unreasonablly high sales, this is the point.

This statement somehow blurs Shen's position between the 'heteronomous' and 'autonomous' poles, but strongly highlights the independent personality that helps people pick up music they truly want. Therefore, it is not products from the cultural industry that he tries to distance himself from, but from those people who accept things without independent consideration. Such taste formed by independent selection is also recognized by other interviewees. For example, Chen describes his cultural taste towards books in this way:

I think I am quite open towards others' taste. It doesn't matter if we like different books or have different opinions towards a certain book, we can still communicate. In fact, if he/she is able to make a point, that's good enough, cause many people can't do that. So as long as he/she is not into violent or anti-human themes, it is acceptable.

Chen suggests the taste he recognizes can 'make a point', so what he values is a person that has their own idea of a book, instead of their preference being in line with his. Chen's statement can be associated with what Shen has claimed as taste based on 'authenticity'. What they both recognize is an independent taste which enables them to choose the cultural goods based on true-self rather than commercial manipulation.

As for the consumption of other cultural forms, video games, for example, 6 of the 10 participants suggest they like to play strategy video games. Besides the

visual and acoustic design of video games, most of the interviewees stressed they will pay attention to a video game's background story, gameplay and the difficulty. They do not play casual games which are "too easy", "boring", or for "wasting time". Like Yao said:

> I like strategy (games) … I enjoy myself in the challenge and competition. And I like to direct the team during the match … I used to try MMORPG (Massively multiplayer online role-playing games), but it's not my type, mostly they are repetitive daily tasks, you just waste time on it …

Their preference for video game can be associated with what Gans' (1982) theorizes about high and low art form. So, not surprisingly, several of them mentioned that they hate a Chinese video game company called *Tencent Games*.

According to Ke, Tencent is a company that only publishes 'economic games': "[Those] who spend more money on it, [are those] who will win. Tencent always makes their games out of balance." Or like Yao says, "In most cases, [Tencent] attracts two kinds of player. [The] first type are freeloaders who do not want to pay for playing game at all and the second type is rich but silly, people who want to pay for bully the first type (of players). I think the first type exists for the second type."

These answers indicate that they tend to distance themselves from video game players who pay money to gain superiority in the gaming world. They think for this kind of player, the joy of playing video games is purely based on entertainment, but they pay attention to a higher level of enjoyment, which is the intellectual experience based on fair competition.

4.2 Being Trendy, Mainstream, or Alternative

Taylor's (2009) research suggests 'trendiness' has become a new form of symbolic capital among contemporary cultural elites, but in this research, when it comes to musical taste, all the interviewees suggest they almost do not pay attention to the trends of music; some even suggest they are disappointed with trendy music. While some of them would catch the latest trends of their favorite cultural forms, this is merely for the purpose of discovering new products. As Ke replies when being asked if he would notice the new trends of music:

No, not really, I don't really care much about it (new music trend). I only occasionally see some information on social platforms, like Weibo or WeChat or other places. But honestly, those so-called trendy songs have disappointed me a lot, so, as a result, I don't even want to click on anything that is tagged as 'trendy'.

Che also adopts a negative attitude towards popular music, especially recent Chinese popular music: "To be honest, I prefer older songs, pop is nice, I mean older popular songs", he says, "so I just enjoy what I like, I don't have to consider what rubbish is being made."

Cen says she gets to know some current music trends once in a while by checking the billboard top 50 on music streaming platforms, but as she explains, "I just want to know, to get some news or something. I do not follow them really."

Several participants claim they will notice the trends of certain popular cultural products they like to discover new things. For example, Li says:

… I used to check daily news of Japanese anime, but now, I don't do that anymore since this industry getting worse and worse … but for video games, I follow many accounts on social platforms, they post loads of information about video games, like popular games, the upcoming release game, and even vintage games. Sometimes funny game videos or new facilities, etc. etc..

For Li, being up-to-date and receiving information about the latest developments of video games is a means of discovering new things. She does not think being well-informed with trends gives her a prominent position among other video game players. As she explains, "I don't think being trendy is something remarkable, since everybody can do this if they want on the phone."

Here, Li points out that getting access to 'trendy information' is not a difficult thing to do on social media. The current era of computing means information has become unprecedentedly accessible. Mobile Internet and social media make it easy for ordinary people to get the latest information. Therefore, my interviewees do not show indication to associate what Taylor (2009) defined as 'in the know' or 'trendy' with more legitimized cultural taste.

In fact, just as Che has stressed above, instead of following something 'trendy', my interviewees prefer 'old' and 'classic' things. Lu explains why she does not want to see newly released movies:

… you know people are busy, we do not have so much time that could be wasted on shitty things actually. For example, a new movie comes out, you don't know if it is shitty or not, and if you want to follow this very trendy film, you will possibly waste 2 hours on rubbish in the theatre.

In this case, information on trends can be easily acquired from the internet and being up-to-date is no longer used as a status marker in participants' discourse of cultural taste. On the contrary, they prefer to connect their cultural taste to older cultural items.

It is also interesting to observe the way in which the interviewees position themselves towards 'mainstream' and 'alternative' (Crewe et al., 2003)., which are two high frequency words in their description of cultural taste. In this research, 5 of 10 interviewees suggest their taste is 'alternative', and most of the participants tend to distance themselves from mainstream preference of cultural products. They defined mainstream as 'repetitive', 'simple', 'childish', 'industrialized', and 'boring'. Lu says she prefers cultural items that are refined and magnificent. She says the mainstream music and movies in China are always talking about love affairs, she dislikes those simple and easy-made things which are 'repetitive' and 'frivolous':

… I especially hate those songs and movies that do not make sense. They are superficial, or say, twee. Or some pretty shoddy work … some people say I've got a strange taste, that's true, I don't like things that most people usually like.

In this excerpt, Lu draws a boundary between herself and 'most people' by remarking that her cultural taste is unusual. Similarly, when asked which kind of people Cen values, she says she admires independent people, and she is inclined to associate this kind of people with uncommon cultural taste:

I adore those independent people. They are decisive and confident. I like this kind of person, and I definitely want to be one of them… I think they would not follow what is mainstream, what is popular, what other people like, I mean, they would never try to be trendy on purpose, they have their own idea of what is good.

For my interviewees, 'alternative' and 'unusual' are valued more than 'mainstream' and 'trendy' in their statements of cultural taste. Here, the position of 'uniqueness' emerges from their discourse of cultural taste. Michael (2017) claims that 'uniqueness' serves as an evidence of 'truly innovative', it can refer to 'authenticity', which represents

something true and original, and is foiled by something fake (Peterson, 1997; Zukin, 2008). However, for my interviewees, 'uniqueness' is less likely to be connected with authenticity but independently exists in their discourse of cultural taste as a way to make a distinction from 'ordinary'. This can be associated with Heikkilä and Rahkonen's (2011) findings that cultural elites are keen to distinguish themselves from the 'ordinary' taste and lifestyle. Chen's statement can serve as a good example. When asked to describe his musical taste, he answered his musical taste can be categorized into the alternative side rather than the mainstream side, and he explains the changes of his musical taste as follows:

> I used to like Hong Kong singers and Cantonese pop music.[10] They are special, and the lyrics and melodies of Canto-pop are obviously superior to Chinese pop. But after I settle down in Guangzhou,[11] it seems that everybody around me speaks Cantonese, and they naturally like Canto-pop … so I'm not that into Canto-pop now, and currently I listen more Japanese pop … I don't know why, maybe it's some subconscious desire to be different with people around me, I guess.

Chen used to live in a non-Cantonese environment where the mainstream music is not Canto-pop, but after moving to Guangzhou, where Cantonese is the dominant language, he removes Canto-pop from his original set of musical interests because Canto-pop no longer represents a marker of uniqueness. Chen's statement makes the emphasis on uniqueness sounds like a means of self-presentation more than a matter of fact.

Interestingly, instead of finding an obvious connection between trendiness and authenticity, I found a tension between uniqueness and authenticity during the interviews. One of my interviewees, Hai, unequivocally states that she dislikes people like Chen who deliberately search for 'uniqueness'. Hai says recently a lot of people are "trying to suggest they are different and extraordinary by declaring they like certain things", as she explains:

> For me, I am interested in contemporary art, not because this is contemporary art … from the minute I saw the work, I liked it. I like it without knowing it is contemporary art, this is a natural process … I saw some works that impressed me a lot and I found these works are made by Damien Hirst, so I started to like this

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[10] a genre of popular music written in standard modern Chinese but sung in Cantonese.

[11] the capital of Canton(Guangdong) province, most of the local Cantonese people speak Cantonese as their first language.

artist. But if you reverse the process, you appreciate it because it is contemporary
art, and you declare you like arts and highlight this point by posting photos on
social media … then things go wrong, I don't deny they like art, but they may like it
with sense of superiority …

The notion of authenticity can be found in Hai's statement, as she openly suggested that people who like arts in pursuit of 'uniqueness' are pretentious and inauthentic to some extent.

4.3 Openness

During the interviews, when being asked questions like 'what is your accepted good taste', all interviewees suggest there should not be good or bad taste, different people are free to choose what they like. And almost all of my interviewees suggest their cultural taste can be described as 'open' and 'tolerant'. As they generally believe their cultural taste is relatively broader than most people in China. 'Openness' then can be defined as a form of cultural capital that they use to make a distinction from others.

For example, Che talks about his taste thusly:

I think maybe [my cultural taste) could be described like 'inclusive', or say
'tolerant' … You may say I'm a dilettante, but I literally like loads of things … And
though I prefer some songs or some works, I don't think I will refuse something very
resolutely.

To be specific, the interviewees present the breadth of their cultural taste in several ways. Firstly, in terms of musical taste, they say they appreciate both high culture and low culture (Bourdieu, 1984). A cultural taste combining both highbrow and lowbrow cultural taste is often associated with openness (Warde et al., 2007). As Che suggests his favorite as:

I don't really care about the genre of music, I will take whatever I like. Symphony is
kind of my stuff, but I also like pop, rock, jazz, or other forms of classical music.

Li also suggests the breadth of her taste in music and art:

I used to listen to pop music in most cases, but recently I just start to like classical music and musicals……and now I have become more obsessed with opera and forget musicals for a little bit.

It seems that, based on their taste, which contains both high culture and popular culture, they can be regarded as 'cultural omnivores' in Peterson and his colleagues' theories (Peterson, 1992; Peterson & Simkus, 1992; Peterson & Kern, 1996). They are not only suggesting their 'omnivorousness' in music and art. They tend to use the active engagement in a wide range of cultural forms and the tolerant attitudes towards consuming highbrow culture and popular culture to illustrate their 'omnivorousness' and 'openness'. As Li told me:

……at least in my opinion, there is no good or bad between going to a classical concert and playing video games at home, those two are both my favourite things for leisure.

When being asked his opinion about difference between consuming highbrow culture and popular culture, Ke replies:

… I can always find interest in different things … I think playing video games or watching a stupid comedy can be as interesting as reading classical Chinese books like Recipes from the Garden of Contentment[12].

Statements like this suggest their openness towards engagement in appreciating high culture as well as consuming popular culture. A strong example is provided by Hai. As a contemporary art lover, she said during the interview:

… I like art, especially contemporary art. My favourite artists are Damien Hirst and Cai Guo-Qiang. I don't think being fond of art is kinda more noble than being fond of … I don't know, let's say, reading comic books or k-pop dancing?

Secondly, some of them express their openness to different types in a certain popular cultural form. Ke, for instance, exemplifies his favoured types of anime and comics (or say Manga for Japanese comics):

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[12] a book focuses on cooking and gastronomy published in 1792, written by the Qing dynasty poet and scholar Yuan Mei in classical Chinese.

Well I am really really open to them. I like stories focused on adventure, fighting, sports etc. … I do not reject Shojo[13] Manga as well, as long as the narrative of the story is good … comedies too … I know a bunch of fans of Japanese Manga disdain American comics, but I enjoy myself reading Marvel comics[14].

At last, these interviewees indicate their cultural taste has changed as they keep gaining more knowledge and information about arts and culture, and they are sure that they will keep accepting new things in the future. Some interviewees stressed that they would like to be more open in their cultural consumption and they would consciously expand the forms or types of culture they choose to consume during leisure time.

Cen explains her changes of taste in the following way:

… as my circle of friends grows wider than before, I found my peers might like this and this and that … if you want to fit in with them, you need to find something in common … so I would consciously listen to some genres of music I never listened before. And I found myself becoming more open-minded by doing so.

Here, Cen shows her will to be open-minded and highlights her effort to be more open in musical listening. She thinks her current cultural taste is 'still a little bit narrow' so she wants to make it 'more diverse'. Similarly, Lu explains how she discovers new books to read:

… I will try something new, you know, it's like a small challenge. Sometimes I will force myself to read a book which I have no related knowledge … I think it's a way to, you know, to gain more knowledge about this world, to inspire myself through work, something like these.

When asked if she has gained something from this, she answers: "Definitely. I'm able to chat with some geeks in my company now."

In these two excerpts, it is not hard to see that Cen and Lu are willing to be more open minded. As a result, they listen to more genres of music or read new types of books to broaden their cultural taste intentionally.

Furthermore, just as DiMaggio and Ostrower (1990) found similar tastes can be a

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[13] Shojo Manga always have a female lead character, and anime or manga of this type are mostly aimed at female audiences.

[14] A publisher of American comic books and related media. Marvel is well-known for its comic books and movies about superheroes such as Captain America, Iron Man and Spider-Man.

means of establishing social connection, my interviewees generally believe being 'open' towards various kinds of music, art and other cultural forms make them easier to connect with different people by having common interests. As claimed by Ke:

> *"I found I can always find common topics (about music/films/other cultural products) with other people …… I think that may be because I have a broad interest in different culture, and my interests just cover their interests".*

Some interviewees further suggest that the cultural taste of a person can reflect his or her characteristic to some extent. Che for example, tries to distance himself from what he calls 'blinkered' people who tend to have very narrow musical taste, as he says, "maybe he/she is an extreme person or something". Likewise, Li expresses her disagreement with those who stay away from 'viral music':

> *To be honest, I used to hate TFBoys[15], I just don't understand why there's a bunch of people like them … but currently I just changed my mind, sometimes I will think 'ah, they are quite good actually' … but my ex-boyfriend, he believes fans of TFBoys are childish and stupid, and he still believes so… I think he never saw their performance, he just judges them like this… but me, I just become like 'ah this is good', 'oh, this is also good'.*

Their statements suggest they value broader cultural taste, which would allow them to make a connection with others. Meanwhile they associate narrow cultural taste with narrow minded characteristic. In this way, like cultural omnivores believe an inclusive taste is more prestigious than a narrow, univorous taste (Peterson, 1992), my interviewees tend to distance themselves from whose taste is confined and intolerant.

As previously mentioned, Hai underlines her aversion to people who use art to distinguish themselves:

> *… I really dislike those so-called art lovers who are keen to isolate art from other cultural forms. They claim art is superior … and those who feel complacency by consuming or liking art … maybe I should not say I dislike them, but anyway, I don't really want to be a part of them… I mean they like to use art to make themselves superior to others.*

Hai suggests that being fond of love is like being fond of any other cultural forms.

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15 A popular Chinese boy band

Hai's openness can be seen in this point. Therefore, instead of using art to make a distinction from people who are not interested in art, Hai tends to use openness and tolerance, which Ollivier finds (2008) are widely used as status markers by upper middle class, to distinguish herself from other art lovers. However, Hai's emphasis of openness and tolerance sound more like self-presentation than a matter of fact. Since she shows strong intolerance towards what she describes as 'so-called art lovers', the statement seems far from a true spirit of openness.

4.4 Proper Reception: A Serious Way of Consumption

Though I have mentioned that most of my interviewees distance themselves from mainstream culture, they do consume mainstream cultural items in some cases. For example, Chen has suggested he has an 'alternative musical taste' during the interview. But when the topic comes to other cultural items he preferred, he openly admits his taste of anime and manga are "ordinary" and "easy":

> *... the Japanese manga and anime I usually watch are very common and accessible,*
> *they are easy to digest. Because, you know, it's something for leisure, I don't want*
> *to be too serious about them. I just watch two or three episodes when I'm having*
> *dinner or something. So I prefer simple ones. And I mostly pick the ones that people*
> *say are funny.*

In a similar way, Che, who claims he dislikes mainstream music, openly acknowledges he prefers popular commercial films or films without profound and sophisticated meanings. As he says, "I watch movies for fun, as long as it can make me laugh, then it's good enough for me."

The method of consumption as a means of distinction making has been found in a number of western countries (Daenekindt & Roose, 2014; Holt, 1997). In their discourse, the mode of cultural consumption is divided into a 'serious' side and a 'non-serious' side which can be defined as two modes of consuming culture.

Yao's answer may serve as a good example of the distinction expression that draws on a 'serious' way of consuming. Yao believes he is a 'serious video-game player' who has a different attitude towards video-games. As he explains:

... I play video games in a more serious way, I have done more than others. For example, if it is a competitive video game, the victory is the most important thing for sure, everybody cares about it. I like playing Dota 2 ... During these years, I keep developing my skills. Me and my friends, we cooperate with each other like a real team, we discuss the tactics and learn from the defeats. We keep getting stronger and stronger in the game because we take it seriously.

Yao especially stressed he and his friends do not play videogames as a way for entertaining. What he is seeking for is a "higher level of enjoyment" that ordinary players may never experience, he says:

If you want to win, you have to control the game rather than just your virtual character. So, you have to improve yourself, you have to play with your brain ... sometimes I feel quite tired after a match ... but anyway, I enjoy myself playing games this way.

This serious way of playing video games can also be found in Ke's answers. Ke suggests he likes to play RPG (Role-Playing Games) and AVG (Adventure Games) and "hunting for Easter eggs" in the games. He thinks sometimes the hidden messages are the most interesting part of the games, so he would spend a lot of time observing the details of the game world. Ke also analyzes the design of video games he likes and write long reviews for them.

Yao and Ke's answers can be associated with what Thornton (1995) has defined as subcultural capital, since the mastery and knowledge of videogames is rendering prestige for them as cultural resources. However, the powerful role of a serious mode of consumption can still be identified when Ke talks about why he admires 'serious players'.

... an extreme example, when the game consoles were still banned in China, a group of video game lovers would take a lot of time and effort to get a game console. So generally speaking, this kind of players may have at least three qualities. First, they must be very into video games, otherwise they won't do so at the beginning; second, they are open, they have the notion and ability to get a game console from overseas to China; third, they are hardworking and are not afraid of dealing with troublesome issues. Except the first one, I think the second and third characteristic are widely acknowledged as good quality, right? I think these people tend to be more educated, and more willing to take responsibility in teamwork.

When talking about music, Ke suggests he does not associate a person's musical preference with his or her characteristic, but here he connects the serious consumption pattern with the personality he values more. To some extent, this may indicate he attaches more importance to the mode of consumption as opposed to consumer goods in the discourse of cultural taste.Based on my interviewees' statements, if they consume a certain cultural form for merely entertainment, they tend to describe themselves as non-serious consumers of this cultural form, consuming it without paying too much attention to the cultural products' quality or details. In this case, they do not tend to use taste towards these cultural items in order to make a distinction from others. Nevertheless, if they define themselves as a 'serious' audience of a certain cultural form, they will use a serious way of consuming to draw boundaries with ordinary audiences. In their discourse, a serious consumption pattern is more prestigious because it represents not only the audience's participation and knowledge of this cultural form, but also reflects certain characteristics of people they recognize. In fact they value the attitude of taking things seriously. In this way, the distinction draws more on the mode of consumption than what is being consumed (see, Daenekindt & Roose, 2014).

4.5 The Position of Traditional Chinese Culture in the Discourse of Cultural Consumption

Just as Wang (2015) emphasizes, the continuity of traditional Chinese culture in contemporary China should be taken into account when doing sociological studies in China's context. In this section, I will focus on the interviewee's answers about traditional Chinese culture and introduce some common things I found.

4 of 10 interviewees suggest they are quite interested in traditional Chinese culture. On the one hand, consuming traditional Chinese culture can function as a marker of more legitimate cultural taste. Xiangsheng[16] is a traditional Chinese comedic performing art. Ke is a Xiangsheng lover, and his answers around Xiangsheng may serve as a good

16 Xiangsheng is also known as crosstalk. Typically, it is in the form of a duo dialogue between two performers, but can also be a monologue by a single performer (similar to most western stand-up comedy).

example:

> *Interviewer*: *What kind people would like Xiangsheng in your opinion?*
>
> *Ke*: *It's hard to say, sometimes Xiangsheng is easy to accept since its nature is a popular cultural form[17], but sometimes audience need some knowledge about classic Chinese culture to 'catch the point'. I would say Xiangsheng is an art form with a certain threshold, but lower one. Lower than Kunqu Opera[18] or Guqin[19]*
>
> *Interviewer*: *So, Xiangsheng is like something that accessible for most people compared with them?*
>
> *Ke*: *Definitely, but if you want to fully enjoy Xiangsheng, you need some basic understanding of traditional Chinese culture, for example you need to know the rule of making Antithetical couplets[20], because a lot of performers would create jokes in this rule. If you know the rule, you will catch the point and find it is super interesting and funny, but if you do not know, then the joke doesn't make sense to you. So, compared with most cultural items nowadays, Xiangsheng does need some knowledge base.*
>
> *Interviewer:* *So you have this kind of knowledge base to appreciate this form of art right?*
>
> *Ke*: *I think so, I have read many books written in classical Chinese, and I have been listening to Xiangsheng for several years, so I can get such things in most cases.*

Here, though Ke agrees Xiangsheng is a popular cultural form, he still illustrates that there is a threshold to appreciate Xiangsheng and emphasizes that a base knowledge is important for the audience to fully understand this art form. In this way, Xiangsheng can be regarded as a type of 'high art form' in Bourdieu's traditional cultural hierarchies (1984) since high art takes more training to understand (Alexander, 2003) and brings

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[17] Xiangsheng has been very popular among residents in Beijing since the late Qing Dynasty (mid-1800s).

[18] One of the oldest forms of Chinese opera, its poetic lyrics are written in classic Chinese, which will be difficult for the audience without a high-level knowledge of Chinese classical culture to appreciate.

[19] A kind of plucked seven-string Chinese musical instrument which belongs to the zither family. Guqin music is famous for its refinement and subtlety, and has traditionally been favored by scholars and literati.

[20] Antithetical couplets are a pair of lines of poetry which are usually hanging on the sides of doors. The two lines have a one-to-one correspondence in their length and meaning. A couplet is always created in Classical Chinese, and ideally should be profound and concise.

more complicated intellectual-aesthetic experience than popular cultural forms (Gans, 1982).

On the other hand, as previously discussed, a 'serious' way of consuming is a way to express distinction. In the case of Xiangsheng, this consumption pattern is highly valued by Ke. When asked for the differences between him and other Xiangsheng audiences, he firstly divides the audiences into three categories which are 'casual fans', 'crazy fans', and 'strict fans'. The 'casual fans' refer to those who do not go to theatre for Xiangsheng, and they only listen to Xiangsheng online. They are not likely to pay for online or offline Xiangsheng performance, mostly they only listen to Xiangsheng for diversion. 'Crazy fans' are those who only like one or two performer(s). For example, Zhang Yunlei is a new and young Xiangsheng performer who recently gained a large number of fans (500 million fans) on social media platforms. Ke believes that most of Zhang Yunlei's fans are fond of him as they are fond of a good-looking actor or model. These kinds of audiences do not pay much attention to Xiangsheng itself.

The last type is 'Strict fans' which Ke says he himself belongs to. 'Strict fans' have listened to Xiangsheng for a long time, they have a base knowledge of traditional Chinese culture. Compared with those extremely popular new actors, strict fans prefer old Xiangsheng masters like Liu Baorui[21]. "Liu Baorui is still popular among our kind, we evaluate a performer based on his skills, not other things". Ke especially expresses the type of performer he likes:

> ... you can always find something interesting in Liu's wording, tone, script, etc.
> Humor has its own scale from bad to good. Strict fans are more likely to have good
> sense of humor. We disdain dirty or shallow jokes but love jokes based on
> interesting characters and stories. Xiangsheng masters usually use a long time to
> shape characters, as a result, audiences can receive lots of high-level interests. In
> short, the more Xiangsheng you listen to, you have more fun from Xiangsheng
> masters' performances.

As a strict fan, Ke tends to make distinctions with casual fans and crazy fans. Strict fans can not only distinguish good or bad works based on their knowledge of Xiangsheng, but also appreciate this art form in a serious way, and by doing so, they will get a higher

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[21] Liu was born in 1915 and became famous around 1940s. He is one of the most famous Xiangsheng performer in China.

level of enjoyment of humor.

In Ke's statement, the cultural capital that renders prestige are firstly, the participation and knowledge of traditional Chinese culture as 'high cultural form' (though Xiangsheng is in fact a kind of lowbrow culture in ancient China society)and secondly, a serious way to appreciate it.

Among all the interviewees, Huang is the one who engages most in traditional Chinese culture. And she is the only interviewee interested in literati painting[22] which was seen as a high cultural form in ancient China. Huang explains the reason she likes literati painting:

> *Huang: … I like the oriental style, which asks for the harmony between painter's self-expression as well as the subject of painting. I'm very interested in this kind of philosophy … It asks painter to capture the spirit rather than just copy the appearance … I saw a comment somewhere before; the originality and innovation of literati painting are very similar to contemporary art in western society. And literati painting appeared in the 11th century, nearly 800 years earlier than contemporary art.*

> *Interviewer: It sounds like you feel a little proud, do you?*

> *Huang: A little bit I think, since our arts is so advanced in that time.*

Huang openly suggests that the advancement of Chinese traditional culture will bring her some sense of pride. When asked if there are other people that have a similar preference for traditional Chinese painting around her, she answers: "Not too much, I know most people in my age are not interested in this. It's a pity." Huang does not tend to make a distinction from those who are not interested in traditional Chinese culture, but she indicates traditional Chinese culture is a marker of more legitimate cultural taste, as national pride participates in constructing this kind of legitimacy.

Huang also stressed that she likes ancient poetry written in Tang and Song dynasty (618-1279). She is especially into a musical style called Gu Feng music, which combines pop music with the lyrics containing the characteristics of ancient poetry[23]. Like several interviewees I have mentioned before, Huang also says "I get tired of popular music (in

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[22] A genre of traditional Chinese ink wash painting uses ink,
[23] "Gu" means ancient and "Feng" means style in Chinese.

China)", and this is the main reason she turns to Gu Feng music. As she openly suggests Gu Feng music is an alternative music type:

> *The lyrics (of Gu Feng music) are beautiful, and the melodies are very different from poppy songs … though I have some friends who are into this kind of music like me … but generally speaking, it is only favoured by several small circles.*

In this way, although Huang mentions that traditional Chinese culture would bring her some sense of national pride, this does not primarily contribute to forming Huang's preference towards traditional Chinese culture. In fact, the intolerance towards 'mainstream music' and the longing for 'uniqueness' plays a more important role in constructing her current musical preference.

Furthermore, I found that answers concerning the problems of authenticity went to extremes when the interviewees spoke about cultural items related to traditional Chinese culture. For example, Che does not like Gu Feng Music which is favored by Huang, as he says:

> *I dislike pop songs which use classical Chinese culture's factors … I don't deny there are good songs though, but mostly they contain traditional culture just in name. They're actually using florid language to sugarcoat their meaningless music.*

However, when asking Huang what she thinks about the question on Gu Feng Music's authenticity, she answers:

> *This is a tricky thing … like any other music type, there are good and bad works in Gu Feng music. But basically, I think Gu Feng Music is like a branch of traditional Chinese culture … you know, like the source is traditional Chinese culture, and no matter how many branches it has developed, the source does not change.*

Generally speaking, cultural items related to traditional Chinese culture do not occupy a major or prominent position in the cultural consumption of my interviewees, but it can sometimes function as a mark of legitimate cultural taste such as the 'highbrow culture' in Bourdieu's cultural hierarchies (1984).

4.6 The Use of Cultural Taste

Most of my interviewees suggest they do not think cultural taste matters much in their

social life, and that they are less likely to judge their own or others' cultural taste. This may be in line with Michael's findings on young business elites (Michael, 2017), but they do not deny cultural taste is important in some cases. Like Li says, "I think it is quite important, you can feel it is a part of your daily life." When asked if someone's taste would influence her impression of them, Li answers, "though I don't think it's rational or correct … but I have to say it does influence."

Huang more openly shows her emphasis on cultural taste, she uses an old saying in classical Chinese to illustrate the possible influence of cultural taste's on people: "Proximity to cinnabar makes one red, to pitch makes one black[24].", Huang says, "if you listen to a certain genre of music for a long time, or you read certain kind of books for a long time, you will be influenced by them, inevitably."

Most participants suggest cultural taste is not that important for starting or maintaining a social relation. They usually built social connections via study or work. However, half of them stress the importance of cultural taste in their stronger relationships. In other words, shared likes and dislikes can facilitate the development of stronger relationships (Edelmann & Vaisey, 2014).

Like Chen says: "I think it (cultural taste) can be a condition for deepening relationships, but not a connection builder." Lu also suggests she would not make friends with people whose taste is widely discrepant with hers:

> *If he or she is really into the music I hate, I do not think we can be good friends or something, and we definitely have different aesthetic interest.*

Though Lu openly suggests she would distance herself with people who has a very different taste from her, other participants seem to place more emphasis on cultural tastes as a means of connecting, rather than distinguishing themselves from others. Che's statement can serve as an example:

> *Interviewer: Why do you want to share music or other interests on social platforms?*
>
> *Che: Well, sometimes it is a way to express mood, emotion or something. Sometimes I find some good music, and I want to share with my friends.*

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[24] 近朱者赤，近墨者黑 in Chinese, which means different environments provide different influences.

Interviewer: Can what you share on social platforms represent your cultural taste?

Che: Hm, good question, I never think about this. I think those things can represent part of my taste, but not exactly the same.

Interviewer: What does it mean for 'part of your taste'?

Che: For example, I go to a symphony concert, the music is impressive and wonderful and I really love the music, but I will not share this on social platform. What I will share is like American pop music. You know, it's like Goffman's front stage and back stage[25].

Interviewer: I see, but why don't you share this part of your interest?

Che: Basically, I think most of my friends are not interested in this type of music, so maybe I won't receive any response from this kind of share, which make me feel a little bit awkward …

In this statement, Che says he is not willing to share interests towards classical music on social platform because it is not able to trigger much interaction between him and his friends. Similarly, Chen explains he does not share his cultural taste towards books on social platforms because most of his friends do not read a lot. Thus, he thinks sharing books gives the appearance of showing off and he does not want to distinguish himself in this way, so what he chooses to share are mainly music and movies.

From the cultural items they choose to share, we might see the interviewees pay more attention to the role of cultural taste as a means of making connections rather than distinction, at least among their peers. Here, cultural taste seems to have a strong connection with social capitals, which Michael (2017) claims have a higher currency among business elites.

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[25] Refer to Erving Goffman's theory 'Dramaturgy'.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

With background research concerning the topic of social distinction based on taste within the context of China, I was curious about the diverse cultural consumption pattern of highly educated Chinese born after 1990s, i.e. the rising period of Chinese Consumer Revolution. With the research question "how do highly educated Chinese born after the Consumer Revolution describe their cultural consumption preferences, and what boundary drawing strategies can be observed in their discourse on cultural taste?" and a sub-question "to what extent are their practices of cultural distinction in line with the findings of American and European research?", I tried to find out what young, highly educated Chinese consider relevant or less relevant to good cultural items and legitimate taste? What does cultural taste mean to them? And what forms of cultural capital can be found in their distinction making strategies?

This research can supplement previous studies on cultural taste of the highly educated population, as well as acting to increase the relatively insufficient academic exploration about the topic of cultural taste in China. To pave the way for future studies on cultural taste and boundary drawing in Chinese society, I attempted to put the theoretical frameworks of current research, which are mostly based on Euro-American societies, into Chinese interviewees' discourse on cultural taste to discuss the applicability of existing theories. With data collected from 10 in-depth interviews, I found the participants' cultural taste can be generally described as 'omnivorous' because their cultural interests cover high culture as well as popular culture. Highbrow culture (both western highbrow culture and ancient Chinese highbrow culture) does not lose its superiority among young highly educated Chinese, since it can still work as a marker for more legitimate taste. In this study, the various cultural resources that young, highly educated Chinese use to distinguish themselves from others can generally be linked to previous western scholars' findings. 'Openness', 'authenticity', 'uniqueness', and other forms of cultural capital that emerged in my interviewee's discourse have already been found in western societies, but some particular variation can still be observed in the context of China.

What Kind of Cultural Goods are Acknowledged?

A number of scholars have already found a strong link between superior status and highbrow culture (for example, Bourdieu, 1984; Chan, 2010), the involvement and knowledge of highbrow culture like western classical music can function as markers for more legitimate cultural taste among young highly educated Chinese.

According to Gans (1982), high art forms contain serious intellectual or aesthetic experiences while low culture merely entertains. In the discourse of the young, highly educated Chinese in this research, this principle is used as a criterion to distinguish acceptable cultural goods (which includes both high and popular cultural forms) from 'meaningless' and 'poor quality' cultural goods that are produced for making profit by solely acting to entertain audiences.

What's more, an interesting thing to highlight is that highbrow culture does not directly link to the most acknowledged culture. Young highly educated Chinese use 'classical music' to describe traditional Chinese music and western highbrow music, and use 'the most classic music' to describe pop or folk music favored by most people in a certain time. Therefore, from their point of view, the most recognized music is not associated with the elite class, which represents the taste of a small number of people, but is linked to the taste of the majority.

What Forms of Cultural Capital Emerge in the Discourse of Cultural Taste

Openness and Uniqueness

Two fundamental boundaries identified in this research are 'openness' and 'uniqueness'.

A group of the interviewees suggest their cultural taste is open and tolerant. They stress their openness in 3 aspects. Firstly, they consume both high and low cultural forms; secondly, they are open to different types within a certain cultural form; and thirdly, they suggest they will continuously accept different things as they keep gaining new knowledge and information about arts and culture. In this way, they tend to associate omnivorous taste with open minded characteristics, making a distinction from those that have a relativly narrow taste. Therefore, although most interviewees suggest there should

not be good or bad taste, they will still express the prestige of their cultural taste via openness and tolerance. In some cases, cultural and social capitals, like Michael (2017) has found in young business professionals, will intersect with each other. For example, some interviewees claim the openness of their taste can help them to connect with different people.

Uniqueness is another form of cultural capital that stands out in interviewees' discourse of cultural taste. Different from European business elites who like to describe their taste as easily accessible or 'poppy' (Ibid.), these interviewees stress they have an alternative cultural taste. As uniqueness is the common denominator between the different cultural forms that they appreciate, they like to draw boundaries between themselves and 'ordinary people', who have 'mainstream taste'. In previous western research on the problem of authenticity, 'uniqueness' is usually aligned with 'authenticity,' which refers to one's true self. However, I found an interesting tension between 'uniqueness' and 'authenticity' in one of the interviewees, Hai. She believes 'uniqueness' is a manipulative strategy used by people who want to display their self-glorification.

Cosmopolitanism, Authenticity and Autonomy

Furthermore, the discourse towards uniqueness and alternative cultural taste is often associated with the cultural exclusion of mainstream and domestic cultural goods. In fact, in young, highly educated Chinese people's distinction expression, the three forms of cultural capital ('uniqueness', 'cosmopolitanism', 'authenticity', and 'autonomy') are usually intertwined with each other to some extent. Nearly all the interviewees suggest they dislike domestic cultural goods and prefer cultural items from other countries. Here the superiority of cosmopolitanism may surface from their discourse, but cosmopolitanism remains a tricky issue, since the intolerance of domestic popular culture, at least from their point of view, is mainly due to its poor quality. Interviewees openly admitted that they will also love domestic cultural products if they were good enough, and this makes their cosmopolitanism relatively obscure. Therefore, the findings of this research are not able to confirm that cosmopolitanism takes up a fundamental ground in highly educated Chinese people's boundary drawing practices, it mostly serves as supplementary evidence when they describe themselves as tolerant, open, or different from most Chinese people.

The longing for authenticity is also highlighted when talking about domestic cultural

goods and current mainstream music in China. Most of the interviewees suggest they are disappointed with current Chinese mainstream music. Using the words from one of the interviewees, the current mainstream music in China is 'fake mainstream', since the popularity of these songs are the result of commercial manipulation rather than a recognition of music. And bad money drives out good, the really good music is then ignored by most of the audiences. This notion may be associated with a disposition of upper classes, who would distance themselves from commercial taste (Bourdieu, 1984; Atkinson, 2011). We may therefore also say there is a connection between 'authenticity' and 'autonomous pole' in their discourse of cultural taste.

In this research, the boundaries tend to focus on the problem of authenticity, because interviewees express more intolerance towards people who would easily be attracted by 'fake mainstream' instead of the commercial value of cultural goods. The authenticity refers to a true-self, which contains an independent personality. This personality allows individuals to choose qualified cultural goods independently without much commercial manipulating from the cultural industry. This type of authenticity might be a peculiar form of cultural capital that emerges specifically in the context of China, which can be further explored in future studies.

A serious way of consuming

The boundaries can also be observed from my interviewees' modes of consumption (Daenekindt & Roose, 2014). They have a 'serious' mode and a 'non-serious' mode to consume different cultural goods. They believe this serious mode will bring a higher level of enjoyment when consuming a cultural form. When interviewees define themselves as a non-serious audience of certain cultural forms, they openly suggest their taste towards these cultural forms are 'ordinary' and 'easy', consuming cultural products merely for entertainment. But when they are 'serious' about a certain form of cultural goods, they would make a distinction with the casual audiences of this cultural form. For young, highly educated Chinese, the serious consumption pattern is more prestigious for two reasons: on the one hand, it indicates an individual's participation and knowledge of a cultural form; on the other hand, it reflects some admirable characteristics, such as hardworking, on individuals who adopt this consumption pattern.

Western Theories in the Context of China

Considering the continuity of traditional Chinese culture in contemporary China, which should not be neglected in Chinese sociological studies (Wang, 2015), and the different development track of Chinese cultural production, the differences between the results of this study and those of previous western studies may deserve some attention. But in fact, the cultural resources and boundary drawing strategies, which have emerged in the interviewees' discourse on cultural taste, do not show much differences from those found in western societies. 'Openness', 'uniqueness', and other emerging forms of cultural capital that render prestige for young highly educated Chinese can generally be linked to previous western studies.

I thought the most significant differences would be found in the discourse on traditional Chinese culture, which is the unique cultural form originated in China. But in general, it does not take a very important role in most of my interviewees' cultural consumption. For several participants who relatively involve more in traditional Chinese culture, no different boundaries drawing strategy could be observed in their discourse on traditional Chinese culture. Like other cultural forms, the interviewees drawing boundaries via the mode of consumption, uniqueness and authenticity in their discourse on cultural taste. However, for audiences today, understanding and appreciating traditional Chinese cultural items (including both low and high form of traditional Chinese culture) need a certain knowledge of ancient Chinese culture. So, in some cases, traditional Chinese culture can function as highbrow culture in Bourdieu's cultural hierarchies.

Besides this, some variations can still be observed in China's specific context. The 'cosmopolitanism' in my interviewee's discourse, for example, remains a vague issue since several participants suggest that the reason they prefer to consume foreign cultural goods is that domestic cultural products, at least in their opinion, are of poor quality. As Shan (2014) claims that under the rapid growth, the situation of cultural industry in China is extremely unbalanced, it's hard to determine conclusively whether cosmopolitan capital really exists or not among young, highly educated Chinese.

Additionally, the different cultural resources that emerged in my interviewees' discourse on cultural taste tend to be entangled with one another. Like some previous findings in western societies, the participants also suggest a longing for 'authenticity' in cultural taste. However, the type of 'authenticity' that emerges in their discourse is highly

associated with 'autonomy', so this type of 'authenticity', which stresses a true-self that enables individuals to be independent from commercial manipulation of cultural industry, is different from the authenticity in previous western theories. These differences can be explained by the rapid growth of the domestic cultural market in Chinese society. Future research can pay more attention to the possible reasons for such variations to further understanding the applicability of American and European theories in China's context.

To sum up, under the background of a lack of studies on cultural taste in the context of China, this research focuses on highly educated Chinese who were born after the Consumer Revolution, deepening the understanding of topics related to social distinction based on cultural taste in Chinese society. Undoubtedly, this research is not perfect, it leaves a lot of questions for future researchers to reach a deeper, and more comprehensive level of understanding. Firstly, most of my interviewees have graduated from, or are currently studying social science, meaning an individual's cultural taste may vary significantly according to the fields he or she engages in. Future researchers may consider this when recruiting participants. Secondly, there seem to be only a few differences between Chinese and western societies on this issue. But this may because this study embarked from an academic foundation of western scholars. Future research may start with societal difference to stress more on the differences between the Chinese and western context.

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Appendix 1. Overview of the interviewees (anonymous)

Name	Gender	Age	Location	Occupation /Sector	Education/Major
Ke Ben	Male	26	Leeds, the UK	Researcher	Phd in Communication; University of Leeds (UK)
Chen Cheng	Male	27	Guangzhou, China	Accounting	MA in Accounting; Jinan University (China)
Lu Yu	Female	24	Shanghai, China	Exhibition curating	BA in Cultural Economics; Xiamen University (China)
Hai Chan	Female	25	Xian, China	Advertising	MA in Management; The Chinese University of Hong Kong (HK)
Cen Qing	Female	24	Amsterdam, the Netherlands	MA student	MA in International Management; Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (The Netherlands)
Li Meiyuan	Female	23	New York, the US	MA student	MA in Education; Columbia University in the City of New York (US)

Che Zong	Male	25	Beijing, China	New Media	MA in Public Relations; University of Leeds (UK)
Yao Li	Male	25	Beijing, China	MA student	MA in Math; Peking University (China)
Huang	Female	23	Rotterdam, the Netherlands.	MA student	MA in Psychology; Erasmus University (The Netherlands)
Shen Hua	Male	24	Beijing, China	MA student	MA in Journalism; Renmin University of China (China)

Appendix 2. Interview Guide (English)

Topics	Main-question	Follow-up questions
Introduction	Could you please briefly introduce yourself?	How old are you?
		Where were you graduated?
		What was your major?
		What is your current occupation?
		What are your parents' occupation?
Taste of Music	What is your musical preference and why?	Do you listen to music?
		When do you listen to music?
		How do you usually listen to music? e.g. the music streaming platform
		What kind of music do you prefer to listen to?
		Why do you like this/these type(s) of music?
		How do you discover new music?
		Do you focus on this/these types of music or try different types?
		Is there any music that you dislike?
		Why do you dislike it?
	How do you participate in music?	Have you ever subscribed online music streaming service?
		Have you ever been to live music performance?
		Why do you choose to (not) go to live music performance?
		Do you play music yourself?
	What does musical taste mean to you?	Is music important from your opinion?
		Do you concern the trend of mainstream popular music?
		What is the "classic" music in your opinion? Could you give several examples?
		How has your musical taste developed over time?

Taste of arts	What are your preference and participation of arts?	When was the last time you visited a museum/gallery/exhibition?		
		Are you interested in visual arts?	Yes	What kind of art do you prefer? And why?
				Who is/are your favorite artist(s)? And why?
				How do you usually consume visual art?
				How do you become interested in visual arts?
			No	Why not?
Taste of other cultural products	What other types of cultural products do you like?	Films?	What types of films do you like/dislike?	
			How do you usually watch movies?	
		TV Programme?	Is there any type of TV programme you particularly like/dislike? Why?	
		Dance?	What types of dance do you like/dislike?	
		Books?	What kinds of books do you like to read?	
			What kind of books you like reading the least?	
			What is your idea about "popular literature"?	
		Traditional Chinese cultural form	How often you consume traditional Chinese cultural forms?	
			what cultural items you like and why?	
			What will be the most important	

			differences between cultural items in ancient China and contemporary China
			What will be the most important differences between cultural items in ancient China and or Western societies?
		Is there any other type of cultural products you like to consume?	**E.g. Videogames, Comics or Animation, etc.**
			What would be the "good taste" in this field?
How do taste /Cultural Capital make sense to the interviewees	What does taste mean to you?	Do you pay attention to current trend developments (e.g. music)?	
		Regarding the consumption of art and cultural products we have talked before, how would you describe your general cultural taste?	
		Would you talk music/films/etc. with your friends?	
		What are the similarities/differences to friends' taste?	
		Do you know someone who has really good taste in your opinion? What does she/he like?	
		What is "the bad taste" from your perspective?	
		Do you share music/films/etc. on social media? When and how often do you do that? Do you receive many likes or comments? Do you find any good music/films/etc. on social media? Do you friends share any good music/films/etc.	

		on social media?
		Do you think social media can reflect/shape people's taste?
		Are similar tastes important for you to make friends?
		Is taste important for a person? In your personal opinion?
	Do you consciously gain "cultural knowledge?"	Have you learned anything else (e.g. knowledge, skills, etc.) after you graduated from school?
		Would you consciously increase your breadth of knowledge?
		For example, watching programs or reading books about art and culture or any other subjects that interest you.
		Why do/don't you want to learn?
		Regarding your own experience, is it beneficial to master such knowledge/skills?
People	What kind of people do you value?	
	What kind of people do you like to connect with?	
	Will taste influence your intention to make friend with someone?	
	Are there any characteristics that you particularly dislike in other people?	
End	Is there anything that you think might be relevant but I haven't addressed?	
	Do you have any question to ask me?	

Appendix 3. Interview Guide (Chinese)

主题	目标	具体问题
介绍	受访者的基本情况	年龄
		毕业院校
		所学专业
		目前职业
		父母的职业
音乐品味	听音乐的偏好	平时听音乐吗
		一般用哪种方式听歌 e.g. 音乐流媒体，手机/电脑/iPod…
		你偏爱哪种类型的音乐？
		你为什么喜欢这种类型的音乐？
		怎么找到新的歌曲来听？
		是否尝试不同类型的音乐？
		你有没有特别讨厌的歌？可以举个例子吗？
		为什么讨厌
	音乐参与的偏好	你有没有订阅任何的音乐流媒体会员服务？
		有没有看过现场音乐表演？歌剧/音乐剧/音乐会等等都算
		你为什么选择去/不去看现场表演呢？
		你自己玩音乐吗？
	音乐对受访者的意义	音乐对你来说重要吗？什么时候觉得它重要？它的存在有什么意义？
		你会关心主流音乐的流行趋势吗？
		你认为什么是"经典"的音乐？能举几个例子吗？
		从小到大，你的音乐偏好有没有发生改变？以后还会继续变化吗？
		你会不会从一个人的音乐偏好中猜测这个人的品味？
视觉艺术		你上一次去博物馆或者美术馆是什么时候？

		你对艺术感兴趣吗?	
		是	是怎么喜欢上的呢
			你喜欢哪种类型的美术?
			你最喜欢的艺术家是?
			你一般怎么消费艺术?
		否	为什么不喜欢?
其他文化艺术形式或产品		电影电视	喜欢看什么类型的电影?
			一般怎么看电影? 去电影院还是线上看?
			为什么选择这种方式看电影?
			为什么特别喜欢这个节目?
		书籍	喜欢读哪种类型的书?
			不喜欢读哪种类型的书?
			你对于网络小说、流行读物的看法
			ACG:动漫、漫画、游戏
		有没有什么其他特别喜欢的文化产品类型（中国传统文化)	古典音乐
			舞蹈：古典、现代、etc.
			戏剧,话剧，舞台剧，etc.
			中国传统文化: 书法，音乐，文学，etc。
		在你喜欢的这个领域里面，你会关注目前的流行趋势吗?	
品味和文化资本对于受访者来说有什么意义?	品味对于受访者的意义	基于我们刚刚聊过额这些,你会评描述自己的 (文化) 品位？ eg. 好/特别/小众/主流/独特	
		你会和朋友讨论你的这些关于文化产品的偏好吗?	
		你和朋友们的品味偏好有什么一样或者不一样的地方吗? 就音乐来说的话	
		你是否认识你觉得有着"好品味"的人? 这个人喜欢什么?	
		你认为哪种品味算是不好的? 可以举例子吗	
		品味与社交媒体	你是否会在社交媒体上分享音乐/

		拥有类似的品味是你交朋有的重要条件吗?	电影/书籍/等文化产品?
			什么情况下会想分享这些东西?
			分享到哪里? 如何分享呢, 可以举个例子吗?
		你认为品味对人们来说重要吗? 有什么用处?	
		从学校毕业之后还有没有学习过什么其他的知识和技能?	
	是否会有意识地增加文化资本储备	你会有意识地去扩大自己 (关于人文艺术) 的知识面吗? 例如收看科普类节目或阅读书籍	
		为什么（不）这样做?	
		根据你之前的经历, 掌握这些知识有没有什么好处?	
		根据你之前的经历, 掌握这些知识有没有什么好处?	
社交	你最欣赏哪种人?		
	你最想和哪种人结交?		