Consumption patterns of the middle class in contemporary China: a case study in Beijing

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Abstract

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Consumption patterns of the middle class in contemporary China: a case study in Beijing

This thesis, set against the background of accounts of globalisation, aims to figure out the consumer orientation of the middle class in contemporary China, in particular how the new elements in consumer orientation operate in the Chinese context. It focuses on the contemporary middle class, including professionals, managers, business-owners and civil servants, and on the metropolitan cities, because these are the two most important factors in the rise of consumer culture in China. Data come from the China General Social Survey of 2003 and 30 interviews with middle class people in Beijing carried out in 2008. The quantitative analysis is concerned with characteristics of the middle class in the metropolitan cities and their participation in consumption practices. Qualitative analysis provides a comprehensive analysis of the consumption patterns and the consumer orientations of 30 adults and considers subjective interpretations in specific contexts. The focus is the consumption patterns from everyday consumption, taste and material culture, and the findings are interpreted in relation to major theories in the sociology of consumption. In order to understand consumption patterns, this dissertation seeks accounts of consumer orientations: the distinct or particular reasons for purchasing and using certain material goods and services. Consumption patterns are also explained against the background of globalisation, and in relation to the essential features of Chinese culture, social changes and social conventions. The analysis draws attention particularly to the justifications of tastes by the Chinese middle class and exposes their concomitant anxieties and ambivalence. It is shown that pursuit of pleasure, tempered with pursuit of comfort, is a significant form of aesthetic justification; and living within one’s means, i.e. keeping a balance between expenditure and income, is the main moral justification. The orientation to personal pleasure and comfort is shaped by social conventions, traditional values and the metropolitan context. Consumer sovereignty, as opposed to social discipline and authority, becomes a force. Despite anxieties and ambivalence, the interviewees generally show satisfaction and confidence with their consumption. The findings challenge the stereotype of the Chinese ‘new rich’ and the one-dimensional pictures of tendencies towards either conspicuous display or frugality.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

Background and aim of this dissertation

It is widely believed that consumption patterns in contemporary China are changing. According to a large body of market research literature, the ‘new rich’ are more engaged in conspicuous consumption and extravagant expenditure. However, we should bear in mind that the context of this pattern of conspicuous consumption and zeal for the consumer culture is a less affluent country, compared with Britain or the USA. The fact is that China experienced material scarcity for a long period and the hegemonic discourse in China until the late 1970s was frugality. Chinese people were well-known for their high saving rate, which persists even today. According to a report by FORTUNE magazine in 2006, the personal saving rate in China is about 30% of household income, compared with a U.S. rate of -0.4% of after-tax household income in 2005. In addition, according to the national statistical yearbook, savings deposit of the urban and rural households increased considerably every year since 1978: although it increased relatively less at the end of the 20th century (by 471,060,000,000 yuan in 2000), it rose largely from 2005 (by 4,535,300,000,000 yuan in 2008). Traditional culture, represented by Confucianism and Taoism, advocates sacrifice and commitments, for instance “obligations to ‘one’s people’” as summarised by Daloz (2007: 51), rather than personal pleasure and comfort. Such a contradictory picture, a pattern of conspicuous consumption embedded in a less developed, frugal and even ascetic national and cultural context, leaves the consumer orientation among Chinese people something of a mystery. To what extent have their consumption patterns, e.g. expenditure structure, taste and material aspirations, and the consumer orientation changed in the post-reform era? What are the distinguishing features of their consumer orientation? And what internal and external factors have led to such a pattern of consumption?

Transition in consumption patterns should be placed against the background of the social and economic reforms of 1978 as well as the background of globalisation. A fundamental change, as a result of the reforms, is the establishment of a market-based economic system. Along with this, a more flourishing consumer market developed, characterised by more abundant material supplies and free trade. Society has also become more stratified. The

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1 See http://money.cnn.com/2006/03/03/news/international/chinasaving_fortune/.
3 1 yuan is equal to about 0.1 pound.
contemporary middle class, consisting of professionals, managers, business-owners and civil servants, are beneficiaries of the reforms. The middle class has expanded and its life chances have also been largely increased, due to multiple occupation and education opportunities enabled by the reforms. Besides, the eastern areas, with better natural resources and privileges on government policy, can make the most of the market opportunities and have become the most highly developed regions. Indeed, social and regional disparities have been strengthened as a consequence of the reforms, so the consumer culture among different social classes and between different areas is diversified.

After the reforms of ‘opening-up to the outside’ in 1978 and especially joining the WTO in 2001, China has participated extensively in globalisation. Engagement in the global market has had dual effects. On the one hand, foreign investment has promoted the economy and the rise of the middle class and more foreign commodities are available, which have greatly expanded the consumer market. On the other hand, China exposed itself to the potential global economic crises, for instance the ‘credit crunch’ in 2008. Moreover, the social and regional disparities have intensified, because the more affluent classes and areas are able to take advantage of increased market chances while the less affluent classes and areas are further marginalised. Nevertheless, unarguably, there are new cues in the external environment caused by participating in globalisation - shopping malls, free market, advertising, etc. – which address the consumers in a new way. By virtue of the spread of commodity or consumer culture, people are being encouraged to adopt a new stance towards their consumption practices. The issue how the complex process of globalisation provides a background for this thesis will be explicated in chapter 2.

Consumption is defined as the process of purchase and use of material goods and services. This dissertation aims to investigate the ways in which the consumer orientation of the middle class has developed and how the new elements in consumer orientation intersect with other more traditional orientations towards family, work and spending. As a significant thread of this thesis, consumer orientation will be detected from the dimensions of everyday consumption, taste and material culture, in relation to the particular social context and social conventions. As suggested by the framework of sociology of everyday life, understanding of consumption should be integrated in everyday life analytical concepts; this notion emphasizes the aspect that people want comfort and pleasure and suggests looking into the mundane activities of consumption. The analysis of the qualitative findings will therefore begin with discussion of everyday consumption with
regard to practices, interpretations and interactions. Chapter 7 will focus on consumer choices, shopping habits, expenditure and management of family finance in everyday life and people’s interpretations. Chapter 8 will show how people make sense of their consumption in everyday interactions. Furthermore, this chapter will particularly associate consumption patterns with traditional values and social changes, to see how consumption is shaped by social conventions and social contexts. The theory of the three dimensions of taste (Warde, 2008) - the distribution, the judgement and the justification of taste - will be used to frame the analysis of tastes in the middle class. Consumer orientation and how it works in the particular context will be further developed through examining taste and material aspirations in chapter 9. The metropolitan city is an important context for this dissertation, so everyday consumption, tastes and material aspirations will also be understood in relation to metropolitan effects, as will be discussed in the quantitative and qualitative chapters.

The study of consumer culture in China

Consumption patterns of Chinese people have been studied by a wide range of sociological, anthropological, psychological and market research. Existing literature on the consumer culture in China will be reviewed in subsequent chapters. Nevertheless, the existing studies either stay at the level of descriptive analysis with less theoretical concerns, or build the arguments, especially about consumer orientations, upon aggregated data or with ambiguous links with empirical evidence. There are hence no fully satisfactory explanations of the patterns of consumption and in particular how people orient themselves towards goods and services in the Chinese context.

This dissertation, based on both quantitative and qualitative data, will examine the consumption patterns from multiple dimensions and will interpret the findings in relation to the major theories in the sociology of consumption. It focuses on the middle class in the metropolitan cities, paying attention to the division between the migrants and the natives. As indicated in the review of the existing research, the middle class participate in consumption practices more extensively, enabled by their higher economic and cultural capital which can afford the expenditure and legitimate their tastes. In addition, consumer culture flourishes most in the metropolitan cities, for instance Beijing and Shanghai. Thus, the dissertation addresses the settings of the metropolitan cities. ‘The middle class’ is defined by employment relations, referring to professionals, managers, business-owners
and civil servants. Although there are a few cases from the elite class in the quantitative data, no interviewees belong to the social elites in the qualitative data, which is the primary data source. So ‘the middle class’ in this dissertation should be understood in the average sense, not particularly aiming at the elites or the lower-middle class. The middle class will be conceptualised in chapter 3.

In particular, because of the regional economic disparities, the course of accumulation of economic, social and cultural capital, being partly dependent on family background, might be different between people who were born in the metropolitan cities and people who immigrated from other areas. Examination of the divergence between middle class migrants and middle class natives is one contribution of this dissertation. The existing literature tends to focus on the ‘temporary migrants’ (Fan, 2001, 2002), the unskilled manual migrants, while less attention has been paid to the ‘permanent migrants’ (Fan, 2001, 2002, 2003; Fang et al., 2006). The latter are educated and skilled non-natives, usually working in the ‘formal sectors’, employment with large and relatively stable employers - government organizations, state-owned enterprises, joint ventures, shareholding enterprises, and enterprises owned/invested in by foreign, Hong Kong, or Taiwanese capital (Guo and Iredale, 2004). In contemporary China, the ‘permanent migrants’ in the metropolitan cities have greatly increased in number, and their life chances, compared with those of the natives positioned at the similar social hierarchy, require evaluation.

In order to understand the consumption patterns, this dissertation will seek accounts of consumer orientation, that is, the distinct or particular reasons for purchasing and using certain material goods and services. There are analyses of consumer orientation from various angles in existing scholarship. Orthodox economics assumes consumers to be rational decision-makers who can make a choice of goods based on personal needs. This utilitarian view of consumer orientation is however challenged by sociologists and later economists. Veblen and Bourdieu think consumption practices are structured by social status. Different from the paradigm of ‘positional consumption’, Giddens and Featherstone consider purchase and use of material goods reflects and constructs one’s identity, which is not necessarily related to social position but is in flux. The expressive paradigm is also applied in the postmodern theories (e.g. Baudrillard, 1988) which, however, see meanings and signs as self-referential and have sovereignty over individuals. However, as Campbell (1995) argues, it is not adequate to interpret consumer behaviour simply as message-conveying or seduction by the market. Instead, Campbell (1995; 1987) and Scitovsky
call attention to the necessarily physical dimension of consumption - the pursuit of pleasure and comfort. It is further affirmed by Campbell that modern hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure that is derived from day-dreaming or fantasy, might be the best way to understand modern consumption in general.

Consumer orientation has been less studied in Chinese scholarship as a way of understanding consumption (except for Wang’s and Zhou’s studies, which will be reviewed in chapter 4), but more studied theoretically in order to advocate a moderate, economically reasonable and environmentally-friendly consumer orientation (e.g. Pan, 2004; Guo, 2004; Zhao, 2007). This consumer orientation, which is saturated with the imperative of social discipline, reflects the dialectical, harmonized and compromised relation between individual and society that characterises Chinese culture. From Confucianism and Taoism to the discourse of ‘moderate’ consumer orientation, the culture stresses what an individual should do in accordance with prescribed social roles, rather than individual freedom with boundaries as emphasized in Western culture. Consequently, explicit justifications of people’s behaviour were absent or were replaced by social rules. It can also be seen that the pursuit of pleasure, comfort or identity, justified by the individualist tradition in Western culture, is weakly established in Chinese culture. However, the pursuit of pleasure and comfort is found by many empirical studies to be significant in contemporary society (Chen, 2003; Zhou, 2005; et al.).

By reviewing the key Western theories in the sociology of consumption, this dissertation will analyze consumer orientation of the middle class within the framework of the conceptualisation of pleasure and comfort suggested by Scitovsky (1976) and the typology of gratification summarized by Warde and Martens (2000). It will be shown that the issues of how the consumer orientation operates in the Chinese context and how the consumers justify their tastes and material aspirations have remained a gap in knowledge. In contemporary society, consumers have access to more abundant material goods and become more autonomous, this dissertation argues that an analysis of justifications is important to understanding the consumption patterns. By applying the framework of the three dimensions of taste – the distribution, the judgement and the justification of taste (Warde, 2008), this thesis will reveal the justifications by Chinese people and bring to attention their concomitant anxieties and ambivalence.

Summary of the key arguments of the thesis
Consumption patterns in China are shaped by social conventions, traditional values and social context. Participation in consumption practices are more significantly differentiated by social class, age and area of residence than by income. The finding essentially shows social disparity, metropolitan effect and the important role of age in such a rapidly transforming society.

The metropolitan middle class is found to begin to adjust to the new market regime which is influenced to some degree by global consumer culture and the new cues in the external environment. A new set of motives (as explained by Mills (1940: 907) ‘motives are accepted justifications for present, future, or past programs or acts’) have thus been incorporated into their everyday understanding of the world. The new set of motives are conceptualised in this thesis as ‘the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort’, which introduces a new set of justifiable practices – ones in which it becomes permissible to consider one’s own pleasure and comfort when determining how to live one’s life. This orientation was not common before: family commitment and frugality were the primary justifications for consumption earlier.

The orientation to personal pleasure and comfort is found to be significant in people’s everyday consumption, taste and material aspiration. Although distinction is implied as the main motive in a few cases, the majority of the interviewees emphasize the pursuit of pleasure and comfort. Hence, self-referential orientations are found to be more significant in the empirical data than orientations aiming to impress others. The pursuit of personal pleasure and comfort is generally considered to be legitimate by the interviewees and does not need to be justified by sufficient family commitment or hard work. Through explaining generational differences, the interviewees can generally justify their consumption practices and even tried to encourage the pursuit of personal pleasure and comfort in their parents to some extent.

These new motives or justifications, on the other hand, are gradually incorporated into a more traditional set of understandings. According to the interviews, the pursuit of pleasure, tempered with pursuit of comfort, is a significant form of aesthetic justification; and keeping a balance between expenditure and income is the main moral justification. The younger interviewees, who display a more significant orientation to personal pleasure and comfort, want to share pleasure and comfort with their family and friends. Therefore, we
currently see in China a particular configuration, certainly differentiated, which involves frugality, family commitment and the syndrome of personal pleasure and comfort. Although there are anxieties and ambivalence, the interviewees are generally, to different extents, satisfied and confident in their consumption. This finding should be associated with both the better-off situations of the middle class in China and their particular patterns of consumption.

It is suggested that the consumer orientation in China now draws on a new set of elements, ones which have been common and widespread in most highly developed capitalist economies. These, however, have been combined with motives and orientations already present in China. The orientation to personal pleasure and comfort did not exist in Maoist China according to the authoritative literature, but can be seen to have taken effect from the way people justify their patterns of consumption in the course of the interviews. It is the key finding of this thesis.

This change, although might be associated with the discourse of commercial or consumer culture, cannot be thought simply to be caused by globalisation or imported from the West. Nor can the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort be understood simply as individualisation or consumerism. The mechanism of the new set of justifications, that is how it was caused or produced, is less of a concern of this dissertation. Rather, this dissertation emphasizes the development of the consumer orientation in contemporary China – the new justifications that are offered by the interviewees when explaining their consumption practices.

**Chapter outline**

Chapter 2 will elaborate the key debates in the field of sociology of consumption. Globalisation is the background theory, which provides a good perspective for understanding the interactions between the imported culture and the local culture. Everyday consumption, taste and material culture are the main themes of the study on consumer culture. The key theories in the areas will be used to justify the research concerns and frame the analysis of the empirical findings. Theories of consumer orientation will help to understand the consumption patterns and to explain the consumer orientation of the middle class. Furthermore, it will be shown how different is the consumer orientation suggested in traditional Chinese culture from that in European
culture, in order to figure out the origins of consumer orientations in contemporary China and what the intellectual puzzles are in the context of a globalised and transitional society.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the formation of the contemporary middle class and the conceptualisation of middle class for this dissertation. It will firstly present a historical analysis of how the reforms have created a middle class, by reviewing literature on economic and social transitions. It will then explain why a social stratification based on employment relations is important in differentiating consumption practices in China. Based on both English and Chinese academic literature, the middle class will be conceptualised. It will further demonstrate characteristics of the contemporary middle class as revealed by several key studies. At the end, this chapter will consider more economic and social reforms that have impact on the life chances of the middle class.

Chapter 4 is another chapter on the national and social context of this dissertation. It will address the nature and extent of the emergence of consumer culture in China, by reviewing literature from both academy and mass media. Firstly, it will present a historical analysis of the emergence of consumer culture in China. It will then examine contemporary consumer culture with regard to the middle class and the metropolitan cities, the two important drivers of the modern consumer culture. At the end, this chapter will review the sociological understanding of consumption patterns in Chinese scholarship, in relation to consumer orientation and underlying social relations.

Chapter 5, the methodology chapter, will explain why the combination of survey analysis with interview analysis is appropriate to this dissertation. This dissertation uses mixed methods. Data come from a national survey in 2003 and 30 interviews in Beijing in 2008. The quantitative analysis functions as background information, which is concerned with characteristics of the middle class in the metropolitan cities and the consumption patterns of the urban population. Quantitative data is good at description and at modelling attitudes and behaviour using a representative sample of a population. However, it cannot reveal the complexity of consumer life nor obtain subjective interpretations. Qualitative data is superior in these aspects. My dissertation will show how the quantitative analysis can be expanded and enriched by the qualitative analysis. Chapter 5 will evaluate the two sources of data and their methods of analysis. The quantitative data will be analyzed by descriptive statistics and multiple correspondence analysis (MCA). The qualitative data will be analyzed through a literal, interpretive and reflexive reading. Most of the existing
qualitative studies of consumer culture in Chinese language have not paid enough attention to methods of analysis. Thus, this dissertation, based on explicit theoretical frameworks and elaborate methods of analysis of data, can provide a more reliable and in-depth analysis of the consumption patterns.

The next four chapters contain empirical material. Chapter 6 is the chapter on the quantitative findings. It will specify how the measurements are constructed and how multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) is applied. It will also illustrate the characteristics of the middle class and the consumption patterns of the urban population, which will frame a context for this dissertation. Some preliminary arguments will also be constructed, from which helpful implications can be drawn for the qualitative analysis.

Chapter 7, 8 and 9 will analyze the findings from the interviews. Chapter 7 focuses on everyday consumption of the middle class in the metropolitan cities. At the beginning, it will discuss the discourse of ‘shopping’ and ‘consumption’ in the context of China, in order to see how consumption is understood in people’s everyday language. Then it will proceed to patterns of everyday expenditure and the management of family finance, from which consumer orientations could be detected.

Chapter 8 will examine consumption patterns of the middle class in relation to social conventions and social contexts. It will illustrate how conventions of family commitment and gift-giving and social interactions have significant impact on the purchase and use of material goods. The discussions will also shed light on the material culture, concerning the social relations and social interactions involved in acquiring, using and exchanging material goods and the meanings of goods. Besides, it will also demonstrate how consumption practices are shaped by different social contexts through analysis of the generational differences in consumption, from which the issue of how people make sense of their consumption could also be shown. This chapter is very important in understanding how the new set of motives are tempered by more traditional values.

Chapter 9 is concerned with tastes and material aspirations. It will examine the patterns of taste among the middle class, with respect to the distribution of taste, the judgement of taste and the justification of taste. It will then move onto the nature and extent of their material aspirations. Social divisions within the middle class will be revealed. Arguments about the development of the consumer orientation will be further developed.
In the conclusion, I will return to the research concerns and aims proposed and evaluate the contribution and limits of this dissertation. An agenda for further research will also be suggested.
Chapter 2 Theoretical approaches from the sociology of consumption

Introduction

This chapter will link my research concerns to sociological debates, in order to establish theoretical frameworks for the analysis. There are a great many theories in the sociology of consumption, and I select several of them which are relevant to my dissertation. As introduced in chapter 1, this thesis is set against the background of globalisation, and the consumption patterns of the middle class will be formulated from the dimensions of everyday consumption, taste and material culture. The focus on these issues has actually been derived from the theoretical interests developed while setting up the research design. The debate on globalisation functions as the background theory, and theories on everyday life, dimensions of taste and material culture are used to structure the analysis of the empirical findings and to frame the interpretations of consumption patterns. Scholarship in the realm of consumer orientation helps to construct arguments on consumer orientation of the middle class, which is the interpretative mechanism of their consumption practices.

There is now a wide range of theoretical work on the topic of consumption. This thesis draws particularly on the contributions of Bente Halkier, Alan Warde, Celia Lury, and Colin Campbell. Halkier (2001) presents a theoretical understanding of consumption which is integrated in everyday life analytical concepts. The purpose of this conceptual integration is to avoid polarisation in sociology of consumption: between seeing consumption as an appendage to production or letting consumption float into free individual choice and aesthetics (Featherstone 1990, cited in Halkier, 2001: 30). In this context, Halkier has demonstrated with empirical evidence how reflexive and routinised consumption practices are mixed together in everyday life (ibid: 27). The theories by Halkier could justify my research concern of everyday life and propose a framework for analysis of everyday consumption of the middle class. Since everyday life ‘is ambivalent as it contains meaningful solidarity and meaningless fragmentation as well as problematic choices and liberating systems’ (Halkier, 2001: 28), consumption, according to Halkier, is portrayed as a relatively autonomous sphere of action, which is the definition postulated by this dissertation.

According to the research findings, taste is not hyper-real, as supposed by postmodern theories, but points to a certain pattern of judgement and justification of taste. Warde (2008)
disentangles the chasm between class based taste and free choice of identity, and provides an efficient framework for analysis of patterns of taste – from the dimensions of distribution, judgement and justification of taste. He particularly argues that the justification of taste becomes more important in contemporary society, particularly because of the social changes brought by advertising, marketing and media commentary. Warde’s (2008) ‘model of justification’ - how people feel good and confident with their taste – is the important framing device for this dissertation. Under this framework, it can be shown that the middle class are gradually drawing upon a new set of justifications when explaining their consumption practices and the consumer orientation can be implied from the justifications. Woodward and Emmison (2001) further highlight moral judgement and justification of taste – taste is not only a question of aesthetics that is associated with social and cultural power but also matters of moral, ethical and communal sensibility. Lamont’s work (1992), which shows some interest in the moral judgement of taste, was criticized by Woodward and Emmison (2001) as remaining in the tradition of linking taste with power and status. The theories on the moral justification of taste, together with Warde’s (2008) ‘model of justification’, provide the core conceptual framework for analysis of the justifications by the metropolitan middle class.

Warde (1990) is also important in the understanding of consumption as a circuit of production, distribution, access and enjoyment, instead of merely as a point of monetary exchange. This conception also points to the proposition that consumers are relatively autonomous in the process of acquisition, appreciation and appropriation of material goods. In this context, the theories of material culture from Lury (1996) help to illustrate the relationship between people and objects as well as the social relations embedded in the process of consumption. Among the dominant paradigms of self-expression and the logic of signs, Campbell is an exceptional scholar who pays attention to the physical demands of consumers and highlights the role of pleasure-seeking in consumption. Although this dissertation is not going to generalise it to Chinese consumers, the dynamic of modern hedonism provides a new perspective for understanding their consumption practices. Furthermore, the more important inspiration from Campbell is the differentiation he makes between other-directed consumer orientation, e.g. emulation and identity-display, and self-referential orientation, e.g. comfort and pleasure, which will frame my analysis of consumer orientation. Campbell, through his examination of the historical and cultural origins of modern hedonism, also identifies the romantic ethic as the philosophical tradition that justifies the pursuit of novelty and pleasure. In terms of philosophical
traditions, Chinese culture can be seen to be very different from European culture (will be explained more later). This difference makes it interesting to look at how the new set of motives - pursuing personal pleasure and comfort, opposed to traditional values, operate in the Chinese context.

Based on the review of the key theories of the sociology of consumption and the overall objective of the research, the guiding research questions are what the empirical patterns of consumption are among the metropolitan middle class, what justifications of consumption are offered by them and what consumer orientation is implied. The core research questions will be answered from the dimensions of everyday life, taste and material culture.

These theories in the sociology of consumption suggested points to investigate at the stage of data collection, and helped to increase confidence in the research focus. They also frame the analysis of the data and provide theoretical grounds for the concluding arguments. The application of these theories, however, requires a critical stance. The fact is that each theory is built upon certain presumptions about the world and human beings, and thus each one can only interpret consumer behaviour in a limited way. For instance, the background theory of globalisation assumes the fluidity of cultures between nations through communication, transnational corporations and international trading. The sociology of everyday life hypothesizes the existence of consumer routines, i.e. unconscious reactions and conduct. The conclusion of this dissertation is based on these assumptions, and generalisation of the conclusion is also restricted to these settings. Another constraint of these theories, important to this dissertation, is the widely used and deeply embedded ‘Western’ discourse. Terms like ‘justification’ and ‘consumer orientation’ are infused with specificity for English language and Western culture, and this issue will be addressed more later. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that introducing these concepts creates a new horizon for studies of Chinese consumer culture. Especially in contemporary China, if one agrees with the premises of globalisation theories, consumers would be recognized as less disciplined by traditional culture than before while facing similar autonomy and dilemmas shared with Western consumers, so justifications for consumer choice are required by them as well.

**Globalisation: the global cultures**
The idea of the ‘global village’ from Marshall McLuhan (1960) has a great influence on the current understanding of globalisation, which stresses homogeneity, standardisation, and shrinking, of course, towards powerful Western culture. The concept of globalisation is said to herald ‘both the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole’ (Robertson, 1992: 8). In this sense, globalisation is accused of jeopardizing local culture and strengthening the hegemony of Western ideology, which has thus aroused substantial resistance all over the world.

As revealed by ethnographic research, however, globalisation is never a one-way force, but ‘a site of struggle’ in which various forces take part (Jackson, 2004). In particular, local culture is never the passive recipient, but interacts with or even transforms imported culture. This has been confirmed by extensive empirical studies (Watson, 1997; Miller, 1998b; Jackson, 2004; Hooper, 2000; Yan, 1997; Wood and Grosvenor, 1997). As a result, the interactions have led to ‘global cultures’, rather than ‘global culture’ (Robertson, 1992: 97), and the contemporary world is characterized by ‘an intense, continuous, comprehensive interplay between the indigenous and the imported’ (Hannerz, 1996, cited in Jackson, 2004: 2). This interpretation insists that the image of the global is not universal, while ‘globality’ is itself a localized image, held within a larger frame of ‘spatialized’ identity (Miller, 1998b: 184). This conclusion was well illustrated by Miller (ibid.) through a case study of the production and consumption of Coca Cola in Trinidad, which will be discussed later.

In fact, the tension (or dialectic) between local and exotic culture has contributed to such a world where it is impossible for any single society to provide the ‘authentic’ source of meaning for any particular commodity or cultural form (Jackson, 2004: 2). This is not a new phenomenon, but has its specific historical and cultural origins. According to Robertson (1992: 113-114), national-societal cultures have been differentially formed through interactions with other societies in the global system, which have then come to constitute the current picture of ‘global culture’. It is the universalism-particularism relationship that has shaped identity of any particular society (ibid.). Under such a mechanism, it is not surprising to find that globalisation is nothing new and that previous generations have witnessed equally dramatic social transformations following capitalism’s earlier expansionary phases (Hirst and Thompson, 1996, cited in Jackson, 2004). The most important hint we can get, from historicizing the transformations, is the multi-centred origins of modernity and the fact that European power, though increasingly dominant, was
fiercely contested (Jackson, 2004). From such a perspective, references to ‘globalisation’ in the present era can be understood as a rhetorical device, deployed in support of a specific (neo-liberal) political agenda (ibid.).

In the process of globalisation, transnational corporations and the media are the most important instruments, ‘… in which consumer tastes and cultures are homogenized and satisfied through the provision of standardized global products created by global corporations with no allegiance to place or community’ (Dicken, 2000, cited in Jackson, 2004: 1). As regards the struggle between global giants and local communities, one issue is worth considering: can any single force be decisive in terms of anticipating outcomes? From the stereotype of globalisation, the answer is yes, that global companies are able to educate and discipline consumers through enacting strategies for the goal of profitability, which are surely dominant and even decisive in the process of globalisation. What I want to argue is that, although certain forces, usually transnational corporations, could appear increasingly dominant in globalisation, no single force, neither global giants nor local communities, can be confident of controlling what happens.

Evidence for this argument can be found in the resilience of distinctive local consumption cultures. The fact of multi-centred origins of modernity discussed above has provided the historical clue, and a series of ethnographic and empirical studies of the interactions between Western culture and local reception have demonstrated the particular situations in different societies. The localisation of McDonald’s in China is a typical example. Yan (1997: 53-66) has elucidated various strategies and operations conducted by McDonald’s in order to ‘localize their foods, converting them into something that is routine and ordinary for Beijing residents’, for example, a children’s paradise section and emphasis on their ‘hygienic’ breakfast. As a result, McDonald’s has been transformed into a Chinese version of American culture where middle class families enjoy their leisure time and children socialize after school (ibid.).

One might, however, claim that transnational corporations are still dominant in the market, and consequently repress consumer sovereignty, although at the cost of compromising with local settings. Miller, as a result of his case study in Trinidad, has pointed out that the strategies of global companies are far more complicated than meeting local consumer desires. Multi-national giants also have to compete with both peer tycoons and local enterprises with local and familiar faces, and this conflict is actually the key to
understanding what companies choose to do (Miller, 1998b). The fact that Coca-Cola tried changing the formula of its drink in response to the taste of the consumers, and was eventually publicly humiliated, has illustrated that global giants per se are not able to predict the outcomes of their strategies. In Yan’s research, it was also shown that local established as well as potential rivals contribute to localization and impair the superior status of transnational companies (Yan, 1997). McDonald’s is not fast food in the opinion of Chinese people, so if they feel like real fast food, they will not patronize McDonald’s. Besides, many local restaurants started to create their own versions of fried chicken and hamburgers, encouraged by the success of foreign fast food chains, and these exist as another force to counteract the power of global companies (ibid.). On the other hand, the responses of local culture in different societies are never unanimous, which increases risk to multi-national business. One example is ‘consumer nationalism’ in China and South Korea, which is embodied in both explicit and subtle forms of resistance to foreign manufacturers (Hooper, 2000; Bak, 1997). Another example is the suspicion of Western goods among post-Soviet consumers, brought by the long-established images of ‘deception’ associated with the former Soviet government (Humphrey, 1995). It has again been confirmed that globalisation is a site of struggle rather than a consequence.

So far, it is clear that globalisation is not a process that can be manipulated by a single assertive force, nor in a simple way by several explicit forces. Instead, the outcomes of globalisation through negotiation, competition and adaptation are beyond the control of any single agent. The trade-off, interplay and tension between the indigenous and the imported have constituted ‘global cultures’, in which the imported culture can only make sense by reference to its local settings. Ethnographic studies of Coca-Cola and McDonald’s in the non-Western world have revealed this interactive process. Thus, globalisation is an ongoing process. The world should be understood at best to be ‘globalizing’ rather than fully ‘globalized’ (Jackson, 2004: 1).

As to this dissertation, Beijing is at centre of localisation and globalisation taking place in China. The accounts of globalisation provide the background of this dissertation, against which the new set of justifications is offered by the middle class and intersects with traditional values. It, however, needs clarifying that globalisation is not the cause of the change in consumer orientation and the new set of justifications is not simply the import of alien values from the West. As can be seen from the above discussion, the process of globalisation is very complicated, in which multiple forces are struggling and interacting

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and it is hard to predict the outcome by any single force; globalisation is an ongoing process. This dissertation therefore takes the globalisation of consumer culture as the background, but not an analysis of the globalisation of consumer culture – through which mechanism consumer culture spreads.

However, ‘Western’ culture is sometimes used in this thesis to indicate the set of propositions and orientations that are common and widespread in most developed capitalist economies, e.g. North America and Europe, but are opposed to traditional Chinese culture. This does not mean that ‘Western’ culture is considered to be homogeneous or one-dimensional. What this thesis emphasizes is that the two cultures, considered as ideal types, have distinct features and promote different cultural assumptions that might have impact on people’s behaviour. Furthermore, ‘Western’ culture is not static and has experienced changes throughout history. In the contemporary period, ‘Western’ culture is often manifested by modern consumer and material culture, the features of which are summarised by Celia Lury (1996). They include availability of a large number and range of consumer goods and shopping sites, the pervasiveness of market exchange and advertising, the political organisation by and of consumers, the changed meaning of being in debt, the autonomy and anxieties led by making choices and self-fashioning, and the increasing emphasis on the style, design and appearance of goods (Lury, 1996: 29-36).

In addition, the middle classes, especially those in developing countries, have higher purchasing power and are the leading group in consumer culture (Chow et al., 2001; McEwen et al., 2006). In this context, the middle class will be conceptualised and defined in chapter 3, and everyday consumption, tastes and material culture of the middle class will be specified in the qualitative analysis.

**Consumption and everyday life**

Assumptions about the extent to which consumption might be expressive, heroic and spectacular have dominated the sociology of consumption, which endeavours to distance itself from utilitarian views by orthodox economics. The sociology of consumption, however, has ignored some equally central phenomena which are less flamboyant or visible and which operate in accordance with a different logic (Gronow and Warde, 2001: 5). The sociology of everyday life, opposed to the presumptions of consumption demonstrating extravagance, highlights the aspect that people want comfort and pleasure
and investigates the mundane activities of consumption. The perspective of everyday life thereby establishes a new and more efficient route to understanding the complexities of consumption practices.

This dissertation employs the framework of the sociology of everyday life as summarised by Halkier (2001) in her study of environmental consideration among consumers. Three concepts are central to this framework: practices, interpretations and interactions. Practices are ‘the activities of the individual in sociality\(^1\), and two types of practices are identified: actions and routines (ibid: 29). Actions consist of intentionally chosen activities that an individual is explicitly capable of accounting for and they work on a basis of reflected knowledge in discursive consciousness (Giddens, 1984; Gullestad, 1989; cited in Halkier, 2001). Routines consist of the continuous stream of activity that is taken for granted and they work on the basis of tacit knowledge in the practical consciousness (ibid.). The most significant difference between actions and routines is that people attempt to reflect upon, negotiate and revise social rules in actions, while in routines people do what the body stores and remembers without reference to rules so it is difficult to reflect on them actively. Despite the divergence, the two types of practices could easily overlap. One reason is that routines also ‘shade over’ into action in consumption so it is a challenge for a researcher to separate ‘true’ action from consumption routines (Ilmonen, 2001). Another reason, from the position of consumers, is the unintended consequences that both of the practices produce, as explained by Giddens (1984, cited in Halkier, 2001). Therefore, people may get frustrated at their consumer choice if it fails to satisfy their demands or desires, no matter whether the choice was made through intentional actions or less reflective routines.

The mechanisms of consumer choice are hence a main subject in the theories of everyday life. Routines are not only a means of reducing uncertainty. They also save energy and ease our everyday lives. In terms of economic theories, routines help to reduce ‘transaction costs’ and make social life predictable (Ilmonen, 2001). Brand loyalty is a quintessential example. Consumers tend to routinize and standardize their choice on consumer goods, to save time on shopping and maximize the outcome, until this circumstance is interrupted, for instance, by scandals of manufacture or by a change in the situation of the consumer. However, the feeling of normality is not achieved without cost, as suggested by Ilmonen

\(^1\) As explained by Halkier (2001: 27), using the term ‘sociality’ should be seen as underlying the processual modality of social life (Bauman, 1992: 190), a notion originally inspired by George Simmel’s understanding of social life as interaction or, as he termed it, sociation (Vergesellschaftung) (Simmel, 1998: 25).
Routines are also impeding structures that reduce the alternatives for action, in the sense that one might feel more comfortable with a normalised routine even if it might be economically ‘irrational’.

On the other hand, in terms of academic interests, practices convey social and cultural messages, so inquiries into them could also reveal ‘very complex dialogues and transactions to do with identity, status, aspirations, cultural capital, and position within a social group’ (Paterson, 2006: 7). Bourdieu’s research shows that one’s tastes carry the messages of social status, while the messages are not intentionally produced but embedded in everyday practices. The notion of practices has enriched the sociology of consumption. As Warde (2005) suggests, it is the fact of engagement in the practice that explains the nature and process of consumption. Consumption is constituted through social practices: wants are generated by practices and we consume for the purpose of conducting practices; justification for individuals can only be found in relation to a particular form of practice and a plurality of social engagements (ibid.).

The second concept in the framework of the sociology of everyday life is interpretations, which are open ascriptions of meaning to phenomena where, over time, they can become typifications, i.e. recognisable as ‘one of a particular kind’ (Luckmann, 1989, cited in Halkier, 2001: 29). The ‘type’ never expresses totally closed structures of meaning but more often, with changeable compositions, draws on several different available practices and discursive repertoires (Antaki, 1994, cited in Halkier, 2001: 30). This consideration of ‘interpretations’ in everyday life highlights the context, e.g. socio-cultural knowledge and social positions, where individuals make sense of phenomena. It also points out the special features of ‘interpretations’, which are at times disorganised and even contradictory but constitute the whole system of understanding.

The third concept is interactions, which are ‘the carrying out of practices and interpretations as part of social relations’ (Halkier, 2001: 30). This is particularly a sociological perspective. People perform routines and understand their life by interacting with ‘known others in social networks as well as distant others in imagined communities’, as concluded by Anderson (1983, in Halkier, 2001: 30). Social relations are produced and reproduced in this process. It is also pointed out acutely by Goffman (1959, in Halkier, 2000) that the participants form the results of the interaction and the interaction forms the participants as well.
It can thus be seen that everyday practices can provide an important lens for understanding consumption. That is why one of the concerns of my interviews is everyday consumption. I investigated the shopping habits of the middle class and their interpretations. I also inquired with whom they talked about shopping and went shopping, how they made judgements of other people’s taste, and how consumer goods were used to maintain social relations. In analysis, this dissertation will apply the framework of everyday life with regard to the three concepts, and attempt to understand how people perform their consumer choices and how people make sense of their consumption in everyday interactions.

The sociology of taste

The perception and mechanisms of taste, contingent on the solution to its immanent antinomy between individuality and universality, are quite differentiated. In contrast to the logic of utility maximization at minimal cost, as postulated by orthodox economics, Veblen (2001{1899}) thinks class is important to an understanding of taste. In his view, conspicuous consumption and waste serve as demonstration of social status and reputation. ‘The principle of conspicuous waste’ guides the formation of habits and norms of conduct, influencing ‘the sense of duty, the sense of beauty, the sense of utility, the sense of devotional or ritualistic fitness and the scientific sense of truth’ (ibid: 86). Therefore, the upper class pursue expensive and refined goods to display their leisure and wealth. The individuality and universality of taste is thus united through emulating or imitating other people’s taste. Although disassociating himself from Veblen, Bourdieu shares class analysis of taste with him. From the perspective of theories of practice, he interprets taste as dispositions forming part of habitus which is embodied in everyday practice. The harmonization of the antinomy of taste is through a series of unconscious referents to an individual’s class origin which can only be comprehended in practice, namely, through a series of applications of schemes of practice (Bourdieu, 1993). In this way, taste is a basis to classify oneself, ‘guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 466).

However, the role that class plays in the understanding of taste has been challenged in several ways. One is through the assumption that class is not the best explanation, and another is that class is not important any more in contemporary society. The former
tradition can be traced back to Simmel. In relation to the theorists in the camp of positional consumption, Simmel also views fashion as class distinctive and the latest fashion and novelty are more often embraced by the upper class (1971: 299-230). However, for Simmel fashion is a self-dynamic process where opposite stages of making a distinction and emulating others automatically follow each other (Simmel, 1905, cited in Gronow, 1997). Thus, fashion and style allow individuals self-expression through a particular taste, while helping to relieve them from a feeling of insecurity. The expressive paradigm can also be found in Beck, Bauman and Giddens. Their basic assumption is that in modern society, which is increasingly governed by the market, people define themselves through the goods and practices that they possess and display and they have the right to choose their identities (see Warde, 1994). However, lifestyles and self-identity are open to change varied by social circumstances, which simultaneously causes insecurity and anxiety (see Beck, 1992; Bauman, 1988; Giddens, 1991, cited by Warde, 1994). Anxiety around judgment of taste, it is suggested, may be solved through dispersed, small communities of sense – ‘neo-tribes’, by which people are intensely, if temporarily, attached by means of shared self-images (Bauman, 1990, 1991, cited by Warde, 1994). Hereby, the individuality and universality of taste can be reconciled by creating and maintaining an appropriate identity.

Besides, more and more evidence in Europe and America has pointed to an omnivorous or eclectic orientation rather than exposure to legitimate culture. It is revealed that the upper class and the high-status groups have the most diversified tastes and tend to distinguish themselves by variety of consumption (Peterson and Kern, 1996; Ollivier, 2008; Coulangeon & Lemel, 2007). These empirical findings have opposed the theories of class distinctive taste, which might indicate that class is not a central structure to understand taste in the contemporary society.

Recent empirical research concerns patterns of taste. Postmodern theorisations maintain that culture is more volatile in post-industrial societies and hence there are no explicit patterns of consumption. Objects form a ‘global, arbitrary and coherent’ system of signs, which gain autonomy through the manipulation of mass media and advertising and are able to fluctuate free from objects (Baudrillard 1981, cited in Sassatelli, 2007: 82). Thus we can no longer understand consumption by considering the relationship between the consumer and the particular goods he or she purchases, and people exist merely as vehicles for expressing the differences between objects (Baudrillard 1998, cited in Sassatelli, 2007: 83).
In contrast to the postmodern pessimism, Warde seeks to build up the relationship between taste and social distinction so as to make sense of patterns of taste. According to Warde (2008), the elements of a theory of taste must include the distribution of tastes, the judgements people make on the basis of their tastes, and the justification of tastes: (1) the distribution of tastes involves ‘a search for the institutions and mechanisms’ leading to the differentiated patterns of taste, such as occupational class, education and generation; (2) the judgement of taste concerns how judgements of the tastes of others create social divisions which serve power and privilege; (3) the justification of tastes evolves from the performance of making judgements, by means of which people can feel good and confident with their tastes. Justification of tastes is a mechanism neglected by Bourdieu, who sees tastes arising from habitus rather than being ‘contentious claims about aesthetic quality and personal commitment to establishing what, among many diverse competing alternatives, is best’ (Warde, 2008: 330). This has made Bourdieu’s position less credible in the light of the social changes brought by advertising, marketing and media commentary, which also make justifications of taste constantly in flux: ‘justifications of good taste are constantly advanced and disputed as people consider the views of others in the community, change their minds, develop their competences, talk about their activity and justify their judgements’ (ibid: 331).

In summary, the theory of three dimensions of taste has constructed social boundaries under a new scheme. It elevates classifying an individual from others by the feeling of how he/she is judged by others, which scheme of classification is ‘at the core of the complex apprehension of the power associated with taste’ (Warde, 2008: 333). The analysis of taste requires focusing on the contexts in which particular syndromes appear, as well as texts and cultural intermediation in judgements and justifications (ibid: 328-333). Furthermore, the justification of taste is particularly important to this thesis in relation to the particularities of Chinese culture and to social transitions in China. It will be shown that the justification of taste offered by the interviewees is very different from those existing before the reforms in 1978 or by the older generations, and consumer orientation can be implied in the justification of taste. The role that justification plays in Chinese culture will be elaborated in the following section of ‘consumer orientation in Chinese society’.

There is indeed evidence, from the middle class in Beijing, that people differentiate each other by referring to cultural dispositions, and justifications are presented in their
interpretations of tastes. Having reviewed the perceptions of taste from different paradigms, this dissertation considers the framework of the three dimensions of taste to be more efficient in interpreting tastes in contemporary society, and will apply it to the Chinese context to reveal the patterns of taste among the middle class.

Material culture and the meanings of goods

As argued above, consumption, namely purchasing and using material goods, is embedded in the nexus of practices, which points out that social relations and interactions are involved in acquiring, using and exchanging things. The notion that ‘social lives have things’ is the first layer meaning of material culture (Lury, 1996: 10-18). Giving gifts to convey sentiments to family or to enhance a social network is a quintessential example. Analyses of household shopping as a projection of sacrificial ritual (Miller, 1998a) and family catering as day-to-day production of connection and sociability (DeVault, 1991) have deepened the understanding of social relations embedded in everyday appropriation of material goods.

The second layer of material culture highlights relationships between things (objects) and persons (subjects), which are less significant in everyday life, but may be a powerful lens by which to view long-term historical shifts and large-scale dynamic transformations (Kopytoff 1986, cited in Lury, 1996). Situated in the process of material circulation, objects continue to play a crucial role in symbolising and communicating cultural meanings, which are never static. At the macro level, meanings of goods are established and regenerated through the advertising and fashion systems which are initiated by producers. At the micro level, meanings are transferred between objects and consumers through rituals identified as exchange, possession, grooming and divestment (McCracken, 1990). This dialectical process constitutes the trajectories or biographies of objects, which, in Lury’s terms, shows that ‘things have social lives’ (1996: 19). Every society lays out culturally and legally approved ‘paths’ for the circulation of objects – conditions are set about what objects may be exchanged for what, by whom, when and under what conditions, whilst countervailing tendencies could be engineered as ‘diversions’ to step off the prescribed paths (Appadurai, 1986: 16-29). In this sense, the passage of ‘paths’ and ‘diversions’ in appreciating and appropriating material goods is able to shed light on clandestine social contexts and transformations, as consumption is made a principal mechanism for supplying the world with meanings.
The two aspects of material culture cannot be separated, but work jointly in the processes of circulation of objects and transfer of meanings. The relationships between objects and persons have also been claimed to be akin to the relationships between people, in the way that objects become vehicles of meaning: ‘People’s quasi-social relationship with objects then attach them to their culture and their social life, linking past and present, mediating direct human relationships and indirect cultural ones’ (Dant, 2000); and the ‘interactions’ between objects and human beings, both enabling people to do what they want and disciplining users in order to generate desirable responses from objects (Dant, 2000; Shove & Southerton, 2000).

In addition to the inspiring concepts and perspectives, a methodology is also implied in the theories of material culture: inquiry into desiring, possessing, and disposing of material goods, especially the ‘paths’ and ‘diversions’, provides an empirical strategy for understanding social lives. Specifically, it is suggested that we look into mundane objects, as they promise to ‘tell us much about the structure and character of the social worlds in which they are situated’, thus to reveal ‘tensions and levels of inter-dependence and co-determination’ crucial to an understanding of consumption (Shove & Southerton, 2000: 16). This methodology can be envisioned as an application of the sociology of everyday life in the field of material culture.

In the light of the material culture theories, this dissertation will elucidate the nature and extent of how people aspire to, like or dislike, exchange and appropriate material goods. Accordingly, the fieldwork is particularly concerned with material aspirations, giving gifts and household shopping, which will be discussed in the qualitative analysis.

**Consumer orientation as interpretation of consumption practices**

By consumer orientation, this dissertation refers to the particular and distinctive motives or reasons for people purchasing and using material goods. Consumer orientation is a topic of debate in social sciences. The economic model assumes the consumer to be an individual who makes a choice of goods based on personal needs or self-interest by exercising rational decision-making techniques, independently of other factors (for example, advertising) or the choices of others (summarised by Miller, 1995: 13).
This utilitarian viewpoint of consumer orientation is challenged by sociologists, who instead place emphasis on the power of mass communication and the logic of distinction (Sassatelli, 2007). One distinguished contribution to this body of literature is made by Veblen. The function of consuming an object, Veblen (2001{1899}) argues, is to demonstrate the pecuniary power of the consumer, so the orientation of the consumer is interpreted as status-display and emulation. The model of social emulation from Veblen can be summarised by Lury’s term ‘positional consumption’ (1996: 80-81). Commodities are purchased and used as markers of social position by consumers who define their relative position in regard to other consumers. In this sense, Bourdieu’s model of taste and distinction also falls into the school of ‘positional consumption’, although he stresses the unconscious referents to one’s class origin (1984). As mentioned in the section on ‘the sociology of taste’, taste, or dispositions of the habitus, structure the practices associated with consumption; and taste also depends on one’s position within a system based on identifying oneself with a social group and distinguishing oneself from others (Bourdieu, 1984). The reasons for consuming an object, although not necessarily an intention in the light of the theory of practice, lie therefore in the dispositions, structured by one’s social position, which are embodied in coherent schemes of practice.

Contrary to the logic of distinction, Simmel emphasizes the role that fashion plays in the era of mass consumption. Consumption, Simmel suggests, is a ‘culturally ordered field of action’ with two fundamental principles of social logic: the need for cohesion or union and the need for differentiation or isolation (1971). Seeing fashion as a self-dynamic process, Simmel points out that the tension in consumption could be tackled by fashion, where the norm is a pattern of taste expressed through the purchase and display of certain styles of clothing (Paterson, 2006).

Like Simmel, Giddens and Featherstone also see consumption as a message, both agreeing that use of material goods reflects and also constructs one’s identity, but not based on class structure, as claimed by Veblen and Bourdieu. From the viewpoint of Giddens, identity is in flux and can be altered or changed as one wishes. The multiple lifestyle choices are particularly enabled by market, media and consumer ‘experts’ who all provide information on how to construct and implement a self-image (Giddens, 1991: 84). Based on this, Featherstone furthermore highlights the principle of the ‘aestheticization of everyday life’ - that even the most mundane goods and practices can be stylised and hold aesthetic qualities. It refers to the rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life in
contemporary society (Featherstone, 1992: 269). Consumption, therefore, under the scheme of ‘aestheticization of everyday life’, is an expressive, playful and unrestricted exercise in self-identity formation (Featherstone, 1992). The logic of signs is also at the heart of postmodernist consumer theories, which state that meanings and signs are self-referential and have sovereignty over individuals. According to Baudrillard (1988: 46), people’s needs are manipulated by the market; consumption, instead of aiming at utility or pleasure, responds to ‘the metaphoric or displaced expression of desire, and the production of a code of social values through the use of differentiating signs’. Thus, the satisfaction of consumers can never be fulfilled, as needs are produced as a force of consumption.

Although the above theories have considered the role of social structure and consumer agency in consumption and the impact of advertising and marketing in modern society, it is not adequate to interpret consumer behaviour simply as message-conveying or seduction by marketing. First of all, postmodern theories make the mistake of taking consumers as unified subjects. However, the motivations of consumption are more complicated. Consumers are not always or wholly passive, and manufacturers cannot always predict or control consumer desires. The autonomy of consumers can be detected in my interview data and other empirical studies. Secondly, sending a message to largely unknown and generally unspecified others merely by a process of displaying or using goods, and often without the assistance of specifically designated display situations, is rather difficult and sometimes misleading, as argued by Campbell (1995). To serve this argument, Campbell has listed several distinctions which often become confusing when the ‘meaning’ of goods is under discussion. The first one is ‘the difference between the fact that actions are intelligible and the assumption that they have an agreed meaning’; the second concerns ‘the confusion between possessing a meaning and constituting a message’; and the third is ‘the confusion between receiving the message and intending to send one’ (Campbell, 1995: 115). Consequently, the expressive paradigm is not an entirely reliable way to interpret consumer behaviour.

By contrast, Campbell suggests that modern consumption practices centre on the pursuit of pleasure. This theory takes into account the necessarily physical dimension of consumption which is neglected by the communicative paradigm, and also directs attention to the processes which individuals perceive and interact with the world around them, without however presuming that their actions are necessarily oriented to others (Campbell, 1995). The dynamic whereby consumers are preoccupied with pursuing pleasure rather than
obtaining satisfaction is explained by Campbell. Since the stimulation that creates pleasurable arousal can as easily derive from an imagined internal source as a real external one, ‘day dreaming about possible novel pleasant experiences can become a more than acceptable alternative to repeating already experienced real ones’ (ibid: 118). Therefore, individuals should be viewed as less motivated by a concern with any presumed ‘satisfaction’ which products may yield, or by a concern to communicate messages to others, than by the pleasure which they derive from the self-illusory experiences that they construct out of the images or associations attached to products (ibid.). Taking tourism as an example, Campbell stresses that the pleasure people gain comes more from day-dreaming/fantasy than from emulations and ostentations experienced in real world. As argued by Campbell (1995: 118), the framework of ‘pleasure-seeking consumers’ or ‘imaginative hedonism’ might be the best way to understand modern consumption in general.

Imaginative hedonism, or modern hedonism, however, has a world of difference from traditional hedonism. Traditional hedonism values an experience because (among other things) it yields ‘pleasures’; while modern hedonism values the ‘pleasure’ which experience can bring (Campbell, 1987: 69). Therefore, traditional hedonism is bound to be more constrained because it relies on the searching for entertaining or joyful activities. However, ‘self-control’ is the ability to obtain pleasure in the form of modern hedonism. As explained by Campbell (ibid: 70), it is impossible to enjoy the experience if one is inundated with excess of stimulation which directs attention away from any introspective appreciation of the subjective dimension of the experience. Interestingly, it is found that the primary source for modern hedonism, characterised by self-control, is Protestant religion in the eighteenth century. The reason, as Campbell (1987: 70-74) suggests, is that “it adopted a position of such outright hostility to the ‘natural’ expression of emotion, and consequently helped to bring about just that split between feeling and action which [modern] hedonism requires”. Thus, ‘pleasure’ in modern hedonism is an abstract feeling as well as a subjective judgement, open to anyone to access and assess.

However, a question hereby arises: how can hedonism, which is often displayed by pursuing novelty and luxury goods, be justified as a ‘virtue’? Campbell opposes the utilitarian stance taken by Adam Smith and Mandeville who justified consumption through its function as stimuli of production. As Campbell (1987: 29) clarifies, ‘that is not a good enough reason to turn it into a virtue. In other words, moral arguments are unlikely to be
overthrown by utilitarian considerations; on the contrary, they are only likely to be successfully countered by other moral arguments’. According to him (ibid: 201), it is the romantic ethic that functions to stimulate and legitimate the form of ‘autonomous, self-illusory hedonism’ which underlies modern consumer behaviour. Romanticism, having its centre of gravity between 1790 and 1830, inherited individualism from the Enlightenment which emphasized the right of each individual to self-determination (ibid: 181-183). This philosophy further sees the self “as an essentially divine, and unique, ‘creative’ genius”, which means that “this was largely interpreted as the right to ‘self-expression’, or self-discovery” (ibid: 183). Moral renewal, according to the romantic doctrine, is through the power of poetry, as it could achieve ‘its educative and improving functions by evoking the states of feeling and imagination which are necessary for right conduct and human happiness’ (ibid: 187). Compared with the utilitarian or emulative theories, the romantic world-view thus provides the highest possible motives with which to justify day-dreaming, longing and the pursuit of originality in life and art and legitimate the search for pleasure as good in itself (ibid: 201).

The perspective of explaining consumption from sensual pleasure is also pursued by Scitovsky, an influential economist. By applying psychological approaches, Scitovsky (1976) distinguishes pleasure from comfort, two important dimensions to understand consumption in his view. Arousal is introduced to identify the differences, which can be basically defined as ‘level of excitement’ (ibid: 28). Feelings of comfort have to do with the level of arousal and depend on whether arousal is or not at its optimum level, whereas feelings of pleasure are created by changes in the arousal level, especially when these changes bring arousal either up or down toward its optimum (ibid: 61). The satisfaction of a need yields both pleasure and comfort, because raising the level of arousal to its optimum accompanies changes. However, the continuous maintenance of comfort would eliminate pleasure because ‘with arousal continuously at its optimum level, there can be no change in arousal toward the optimum’ (ibid: 71). Scitovsky believes that consumers are able to make a rational choice between pleasure and comfort. Some people clearly opt for comfort in everything, while many other people seek to escape boredom and gain pleasure. For the latter, stimulations are needed to keep off boredom ‘at the cost of that temporary raising of arousal beyond its optimum, whose strain is the price we must pay for the pleasures of mounting tension and its subsequent release’ (ibid: 76). However, Scitovsky’s theory is criticized by Campbell mainly in his utilitarian conception of pleasure. As argued by Campbell (1987:59-60), pleasure and utility are very different concepts, relating to
contrasting aspects of human conduct, so the pursuit of pleasure can only be explained by a model based on a hedonistic rather than an utilitarian assumption. Nevertheless, the pursuit of pleasure and comfort is also found to be significant by this dissertation, and the conceptions proposed by Scitovsky provide a good framework to analyze consumer orientations (see chapter 9).

The pursuit of pleasure and comfort, stressing physical demands and self-referential motives, has however been neglected by many sociologists, partly because they are keen to expose social understanding of consumption processes which value questions of class, status, inequality and social symbolism (as summarised by Woodward, 2003). In order to tackle this problem, an effective ‘corrective’ as proposed by Woodward (2003) is to explore consumption from the viewpoint of actors, seeking to expose the strategies, narratives and accounts that literally constitute the consumption act. In his study on home decoration by the middle-class householders in Australia, Woodward finds that hedonistic desires are tempered with the goal of living a ‘comfortable’, ‘relaxed’ or ‘balanced’ lifestyle, whereas the desires to be distinctive or superior are less significant in the aesthetic expressions (ibid: 402-409). Thus, the importance of self-referential orientations of consumption, as opposed to other-directed orientations, has been supported by empirical evidence.

The pursuit of pleasure and comfort, with its underlying aesthetic principles, falls into the category of aesthetic judgement of tastes, which considers taste shaped by social and cultural power. This tradition, apparent in the work of Kant, Bourdieu and Veblen, is central to the sociological discourse. However, moral concerns of taste and whether the pursuit of personal interests can be legitimate in relation to the ‘sociality’ of the individual, remain less thoroughly explored, although Lamont’s work shows some interest in the moral judgement of taste. Based on accounts from a sample of upper-middle class subjects in France and the United States, Lamont highlights moral character and qualities, such as honesty, work ethic, personal integrity and consideration for others, together with social positions and cultural attainment in creating symbolic boundaries (1992: 3-4). Woodward and Emmison (2001: 296), however, regard Lamont’s work as remaining in the tradition of linking taste with power and status: ‘… emphasizing that patterns of cultural taste are enmeshed within complexly interacting forms of social and cultural power, by means of which differences in tastes and cultural preferences are used as markers of social positions …’. They instead connect the formation of taste at individual level with the
'socialness' of tastes, concerning civility, collective sentiments and techniques of fashioning the self. They investigated how actors understand the categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ taste, using a recent Australian national survey. It is suggested by Woodward and Emmison (2001) that judgments of taste are not only a question of aesthetics but also matters of moral, ethical and communal sensibility. In particular, older people tend to make judgement of taste from a collective/social dimension, for instance, in terms of whether they are appropriate, acceptable, thoughtful, or offensive (ibid.). These understandings of aesthetic and moral judgement of tastes, as reviewed above, build up a helpful framework to analyze the accounts of consumption from interviewees and will be employed to structure the analysis of the justification of taste in this dissertation.

**Consumer orientation in Chinese society**

As addressed above, the pursuit of pleasure and comfort can be justified by the individualist tradition in Western culture. Chinese culture, however, has been seen to stand in a different position on consumer orientation. The discourse of frugality has long dominated the history of Chinese society, it being the kernel of Confucianism and Taoism, two most influential religions / cultures. According to Confucianism, thrift is a virtue and one should not desire material goods beyond basic needs. The essence of this advocacy is regulation, in order to maintain a hierarchical society. Consumption is not only an issue of taste. Rather, excessive consumption is related to the erosion of social order if the lower class is allowed to imitate the higher class (Fu, 2000; Yu, 1999; Zhang, 1999). Taoism also embraces the ethic of frugality, but more from a stance of meditation and mental health. As Taoism claims, the sense of satisfaction would not come from use of material goods, but from being content with one’s lot. This kind of meditation through a frugal life, however, is developed by Taoism to such an extreme that it even denies any forms of consumption and appreciates getting satisfaction from material scarcity (Fu, 2000; Zhang, 1999). As the economy progressed, the principle of hierarchical consumption and the extreme depreciation of material goods faded into history. However, the value of frugality and saving for the future has remained a feature of Chinese people to this day (Li, 1998).

It might be argued that legitimate consumer orientation differs between Western and Chinese culture and the pursuit of pleasure and comfort is essentially in contradiction with the traditional culture in China. The reason for the divergent consumer orientations of the two cultures lies in their different presumptions about the relationship between individual
and society. As mentioned above, European culture may be seen as more self-oriented and humanistic. In addition, social order in Western societies rests on acceptance of the boundary constraints on individual freedom, and the principles are more or less based on independent individuals (Redding, 1993). By contrast, Chinese religions and cultures seek a dialectical, harmonized and compromised relationship between individual and society (Zheng, 2005). In fact, as Redding (1993: 44) pointed out, the Chinese state is in essence the super-family of Chinese people. Within this structure, the maintenance of order was founded on the morally enriched prescriptions for relationships (ibid.). Thus the individual finds dignity and meaning in the maintenance of harmony in his own social context (ibid.). It is therefore illuminating that frugality is no more than an instrument for Confucianism and Taoism to advocate coherence: the former aims at a hierarchical social order and the latter aims at the harmony between internal and external worlds (Fu, 2000; Zhang, 1999). It is thus understandable why hedonism has not developed from Chinese traditional culture, as in a culture stressing the unification between individual and society it is less likely to encourage personal pleasure.

Therefore, one would not be surprised to discover that the ‘official’ discourse of consumer orientation in contemporary China embraces moderate, economically reasonable and environmentally-friendly consumption practices (Pan, 2004; Guo, 2004; Zhao, 2007), while denouncing extravagant and hedonistic consumption (Niu, 2005; Li, 2003). Consumerism, understood as a Western ideological justification for excessive consumption and seductive demands, is thought to be an ‘unhealthy’ consumer orientation and should be rejected in China, where a consumer society is emerging though (Li and Deng, 2003). It can be seen that the ‘consumer orientation’ or ‘consumer ethic’ in Chinese scholarship refers less to a neutral technical term accounting for consumer behavior, but more to a discourse saturated with power and moral judgment. Such a discourse, however, has left itself in a dilemma: where is the boundary between moderate consumption and excessive consumption? Where is the boundary between consuming objects and consuming symbols (Zou and Xia, 2004)? The ambivalence to consumerism is also embodied in ideological discourse after the reforms of 1978, between the consequence of undermining the traditional ethic of frugality and its use as a tool to stimulate economy and to distract people from political zeal (Zhao and Belk, 2008). In fact, according to Chua (2000: 9), it is the common dilemma for Eastern Asian countries, where the rising consumer culture was

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1 By official discourse, I mean the discourse approved by the government, and is represented in the literature that I cite thereafter.
initially a political tactic but has gradually left the country at risk of insatiable consumer desire and aggravated class division.

However, in people’s everyday life, consumption practices are not always mediated by the traditional culture or the official discourse. The emergence of consumer culture can be traced back to the development of modern society. Early in the 1920s, the ideology of ‘consumerism’ (directly translated from the literature) appeared in Shanghai, which was the frontier of foreign trade and immigration in China (Xu and Wang, 2005). The ethic of hedonism, asserting that the purpose of life is personal pleasure, played a pivotal role in constructing consumption practices in Shanghai. In consequence, constant demands for luxury and novel goods were justified, and the hedonistic ethic was particularly accepted and diffused among the rising bourgeoisie (ibid.). In contemporary society, the nature and extent of the consumer culture has also been revealed by existing research. By operationalising consumerism as ‘consuming premium goods, advertising effects on consumption and the symbolic referents of consumption’, it is suggested that consumerism exists in the consumption practices of Chinese people (Chen, 2003). In addition, my interviewees in Beijing are to some extent similar to the consumers in Britain and the USA, in terms of the brand-savvy, the preference for tourism, satisfied with their lives, financially satisfied and optimistic, as revealed by a cross-country research in 2004 (Sun, Horn and Merritt, 2004). The findings shed light on the ways in which consumption practices of Chinese people have changed. More literature on the consumer culture among Chinese people will be reviewed in chapter 4.

This section has particularly reviewed the ethics and values that characterise Western and Chinese culture. The ‘consumer’ culture advocated by traditional Chinese culture and the ‘official discourse’ is different from that typical of Western culture. Nevertheless, Chinese consumers in contemporary period have shown some new syndromes that are widely approved within Western culture and are widespread in most developed capitalist societies. Much existing literature on consumer culture in China simply attributed the new syndromes to be ‘consumerism’ and made much effort to figure out the nature and extent of the ‘consumerist’ orientation or what kind of consumer orientation should be advocated. However, it is doubtful if the new phenomenon together with the underlying new set of motives is necessarily associated with ‘consumerism’ – the very debating discourse originated and developed in Western societies. For example, is the pursuit of pleasure and comfort in contemporary China the same with that in the Western context in its nature and
mechanism? Furthermore, the issues of how the new syndromes are tempered by the more traditional set of values and how Chinese consumers justify their tastes have remained a mystery. The gap in knowledge of justifications is actually a reflection of the Chinese culture. From Confucianism and Taoism to contemporary official discourse, the culture stresses more of what an individual should do for the sake of a harmonized relationship between individual and society, than of individual freedom with boundaries as emphasized in Western culture\(^1\). It might be implied that justification was ‘muted’ or replaced by social rules in traditional Chinese culture, since behaviour principles were prescribed according to social roles, with punishment as the alternative. That is why I cannot even find a corresponding word in Chinese to translate ‘justification’. In the light of the Western theoretical framework, especially in the context of globalisation, this dissertation will interpret consumption practices among Chinese people by ‘unmuting’ justification of tastes and bringing to attention concomitant anxieties and ambivalence.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed some key theories in the sociology of consumption. Through critical discussion of the sociological debates, this chapter has justified the focus of this dissertation and outlined the theoretical frameworks to be employed in the analysis. Chapter 3 will present a historical and sociological analysis of the emergence of the middle class, and chapter 4 will be concerned with the emergence of consumer culture in China. Both chapters will refer to more literature on these topics from Chinese scholars.

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\(^1\) A quotation from a popular TV show in Taiwan is a vivid reflection of the disciplinary culture, which becomes especially fundamental in today’s mainland China (excluding Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau). It is, ‘anything can be done in Hong Kong, except what is not permitted by law; nothing can be done in Singapore, except what is permitted by law; anything can be done in Taiwan, including what is not permitted by law; nothing can be done in the mainland, including what is permitted by law’. Retrieved from http://baike.baidu.com/view/454850.htm [Accessed in February, 2010]
Chapter 3 The formation of the contemporary middle class

Introduction

Along the timeline of social transitions in China in the 20th century, the two most salient points are 1949, when communist China was founded, and 1978, when the ‘reform and opening-up’ policy commenced. The latter is especially a milestone for contemporary society. The tremendous economic and social changes after 1978 can be described as the process from an egalitarian to a heterogeneous society, with regard to economic institutions, social structures and consumption patterns: (1) the state-dominant commodity circulation channel was superseded gradually by a free, profit-oriented market with access to diverse and abundant commodities; (2) the ‘illusion’ of an egalitarian society was replaced by a stratified social structure composed of groups with different life chances and social status. The consequence was that working class people and peasants became marginalized (He, 2005); (3) the unified consumer market across the country has been structured by social class and region: the ‘massified’ consumption pattern was displaced by various domestic investments in accordance with household status (Lu, 2000); the homogeneous consumer market was also displaced by regional disparity, in that the eastern and coastal areas are more developed while the western and inner areas are less developed.

As a result of the reforms, an ideology that highlights the satisfaction of personal demands through use of material goods has been encouraged by the government ever since, although with complicated motives and constant adjustments. The middle class, especially those in professional and managerial occupations, have gained higher social status due to the growth of diverse economies and the development of higher education. They are a particularly important force in the rise of consumer culture, because of their frequent participation in wide ranges of consumption practices and the new values embedded in their consumption patterns.

Based on the above background and the research concerns, this dissertation has referred to a large amount of the most recent sources, including journal articles, academic books, and articles from mass media and internet. Chapter 3 and chapter 4 will mainly review the Chinese language literature and attempt to frame the social and national context of this dissertation. Most of the journal articles are retrieved from ‘Chinese Academic journals full-text database’ and the access dates range from 2007 to 2010. Most of the academic
books are obtained from the National Library of China, which owns the largest collection of books and archives in the country. The point of retrieval was 2008 when I was engaged in fieldwork in Beijing. I also referred to articles on the internet about the important events in the reforms.

This chapter will present a historical and sociological analysis of how the reforms have created the middle class, by reviewing literature on the economic and social transitions. Firstly, it will explore the formation of the contemporary middle class in relation to the history of the middle class and the reforms since 1978. Secondly, it will demonstrate the characteristics of the contemporary middle class as revealed by several key studies. At the end, it will be concerned with more economic and social reforms that have an impact on the life chances of the middle class, including the economic disparities between regions, the history of migration and the housing policy.

**Expansion of the middle class**

The middle class as a group with higher social status and better life chances did not come into existence until after the 1978 reforms. There were political, social and economic reasons embedded in the bias against merchants and the middle class. However, when China directed itself to the market-based economy and economic efficiency becomes the primary concern, the contribution of the middle class has been highlighted, in terms of its intelligence in production and the zeal for consumption. This section will firstly give a brief review of the history of the middle class and then analyze the formation of the contemporary middle class mainly from economic and social perspectives. It is argued that the growth of the private and the foreign economy, the development of the service sector and the renaissance of higher education play important roles in expanding the population and improving their life chances.

**History of the middle class**

In ancient China, merchants had long been excluded by the mainstream society, as a consequence of the dominant social policy of ‘Physiocracy and Commerce Suppressing’ (zhong nong yi shang). They were also thought to be morally bad, as their image of extravagance and idling is contrary to the traditional ethics of frugality and diligence (Hu, 1995). Tang and Song dynasties (618-1279AC), however, were a major turning point in the
transition of social structure in Chinese society. A new social class, which was different from previous social classes depending on family origins, emerged and became the ‘middle class’ between aristocracy and plebeians during this period (Lin, 2006). This new social class, named as ‘the rich class’ (fu min) by historians, were generally well-educated and owned substantial wealth by employing labourers in agriculture, commerce, handicraft and other industries (Lin, 2006; Cao, 2008). The rise of ‘the rich class’ had greatly enhanced the social status of merchants, increased social mobility, and expanded the market-based economy in feudal China (Lin, 2006). With the development of capitalism, merchants gained higher social status at the end of the 19th century. One specific reason is that the country was under attack by foreign invaders at that time, and commerce was thought by both the authorities and the social elite to be the most effective way to rescue the nation (Gan and Pan, 2001). As the foreign economy increased thereafter, a new occupational group called ‘mai ban’, who were employed by foreign companies and some of whom established their own business later, came into existence and made considerable contribution to the rise of capitalism in China (Zhang, 2003). From the end of the 19th century until 1949, the modern ‘commercial and industrial class’ had been formed, including domestic traders, ‘mai ban’, bankers, and manufacture and mining merchants (Zhang, 2006). The modern Chinese middle class is also thought to have emerged at this stage. They were employers in domestic commerce and industries, ‘mai ban’, government officers and the earliest professionals including professors, lawyers and artists (Zhou, 2005).

After the communist revolution in 1949, the middle class were destroyed and reconstructed into a socialist working class. In Mao’s time, thirty years between 1949 and 1978, the middle class in China consisted of ordinary cadres, ordinary intellectuals, and staff in state-owned enterprises including a proportion of manual workers (Li, 2001). Middle class in this period was identified as the ‘old middle class’ (ibid.). The ‘new middle class’ emerged after 1978 in correspondence with the economic and social reforms (Zhou, 2005; Li, 1999, 2001). According to Li (2001), the ‘new middle class’ tend to be business-owners, or employed by foreign companies and younger in age. Occupation and industry sector are the main variables to differentiate the ‘new middle class’ from the ‘old middle class’, as argued by Li (ibid.). ‘New rich’ is another name of the middle class in contemporary China, as proposed in Buckley’s research, ‘those people who have acquired considerable wealth and status as a result of the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping’ (1999: 280). Nevertheless, there are still debates over who the middle class are in contemporary China,
as will be discussed later.

Having reviewed the status of the middle class in the history of China, this section will move onto the way economic and social changes led to the emergence of the ‘new middle class’ in contemporary society. Three transitions are crucial here, the growth of multiple economies, the development of the service sector, as well as the expansion of higher education. By examining these economic and social changes, we can see how closely the interests of the middle class are associated with the reforms, which is the key to understanding why the interviewees are generally confident and optimistic.

**Growth of the private and the foreign economy**

After the reforms of 1978, the economy became more directed by market mechanisms: (1) resources are mainly configured by the market, and government is the administrator of macro-economy and public affairs; (2) the share of non-state-owned economy increased, e.g. the proportion of GDP contributed by the private sector was as high as 51% in 1998 according to World Bank; and (3) a complete market system including financial markets, labour markets, real-estate markets, technology markets and information markets is being established\(^1\). The economy, however, did not increase dramatically until Deng Xiaoping’s ‘Southern talk’ published in 1992, when he travelled to several areas in the South and encouraged faster progress of the reforms. As a result, GDP increased by 14.2% in 1992, which kept rising in 1993 (Chen, 2007).

The expansion of the contemporary middle class lies firstly in the growth of the private and the foreign economy which has provided a large number of professional and managerial jobs with better income. The ideological struggles over domestic private enterprises, however, had not been concluded until 1988 when these became legitimized, and private enterprises were defined as private-owned businesses with more than eight employees (Zhang, 2009). During the twenty years after 1978, the citizenship of business owners, legitimization of private business and the status of private sectors had remained contentious but progress was made. In 1999, the non-state-owned economy, including the self-employed and the private-owned economy, was approved as an important component of socialist market economy, which was written into the Constitution. The sixteenth

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National Representative Conference of the China Communist Party held in 2002 further confirmed that the private economy is to be encouraged and supported steadfastly. In 2007, Property Law was enacted, which clarifies for the first time that the properties of business-owners are equally protected with those owned by the state and the public. Therefore, it is observed that the domestic private economy has developed rapidly since 1992 (Zhang, 2009). By the end of 2006, there are 4,981,000 domestic private-owned enterprises, with 1,186,000 with registered capital of over 1 million yuan, and the share of GDP produced by the private-owned enterprises in 2006 was 40% (ibid.).

The group of ‘white collars’ were created along with the development of foreign investment, which had been growing significantly since China decided to open up to the outside world in 1978. At the beginning of the reforms, foreign investment was only clustered in the ‘special economic zones’ in the South, and focused mainly on medium-scale projects in the service and consumer industry (Jiang, 2008). During the decade between 1990 and 2002, foreign investment extended to the areas along the east coastal line and Yangtze River, and become interested in large-scale projects on manufacture (ibid.). Foreign investment is generally thought to be beneficial to the Chinese economy, in terms of providing abundant financial resources and enhancing the competence of domestic enterprises (Jiang, 2008; Chen, 2008). The high salary paid by foreign companies is especially positive for social well-being. The average annual salary offered by foreign companies, state-owned enterprises and collective-owned enterprises in 2007 was 27,942 yuan, 26,620 yuan and 15,595 yuan respectively (Jiang, 2008). Therefore, by the measurements of income and occupation, ‘white collars’, those working in the foreign companies as clerks, professionals and managers, are often categorized as middle class in both academic field and everyday life.

**Development of the service sector**

The service sector¹ had been completely ignored under the planned economy system, as

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¹ According to the classification of industry by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the primary sector includes mainly agriculture (farming, forestry, fishing, and animal husbandry), the secondary sector includes mainly manufacturing and construction, and the service sector involves all the other sectors excluded by the first two sectors. The service sector includes four respects: (1) circulation, including transport, storage, post and telecom, wholesale and retail, and restaurants; (2) providing service for production and life, including finance, insurance, geologic perambulation, management of water conservancy, real estate, social service, service for agriculture, auxiliary industry of traffic, comprehensive technology service, etc.; (3) providing service for education and civilisation, including education, culture and art, broadcasting, movies, television and audiovisual activities, health, social security and social welfare, scientific research, etc.; (4) providing
manufacturing industry was thought to be the primary route to modern society. Bias against the service sector remained until the beginning of the reforms of 1978, when agriculture and manufacture were still emphasized (Xia, 2008). It was not until 1992, when the bulletin of ‘accelerating the development of the service sector’ was enacted by the State Council, that reform aimed at the service industry was carried out (ibid.). Nevertheless, the reform was rather conservative, as some of the fields were considered to be associated with hegemony, such as banks as a tool to regulate economy and media as an ideological instrument (ibid.). The emergence and prosperity of the new service sector¹ in China is actually owed to the foreign investment (Xia, 2008). Since the late 1990s, the new service sector, i.e. real estate, finance, insurance, information technology, tourism, etc., has become the focus of foreign investment; and it has been proved by experience that the earlier a sector is opened up, the faster it will develop (ibid.). Especially after China joined WTO in 2001, the service sector, particularly the financial sector, was opened up with fewer constraints. In 2007, foreign investment worth 38,600,000,000 dollars was absorbed, among which as much as 46% of total foreign capital was concentrated on the service sector (ibid.). The added value of the service industry increased from 86,500,000,000 yuan in 1978 to 9,632,800,000,000 yuan in 2007, with annual rate of growth at 11.5% (ibid.). It is affirmed that the service sector has been a pivotal factor for the economic boom, in terms of generating employment and contribution to GDP. In particular, the service sector, especially the new service sector, supplies substantial professional and managerial jobs, which have thus facilitated the expansion of the middle class (Xia, 2008; Hu & Hu, 2008).

Renaissance of higher education

The rise of the middle class does not rely only on the revival of the economic sectors, but also on the renaissance of higher education since 1978. After communist China was founded in 1949, the scheme of university entrance examination continued but was

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¹ There is no definition specific for ‘new service sector’ in academic use. But it is commonly accepted that the ‘new service sector’ emerged with the development of the ‘knowledge economy’, which is the idea of keeping competitive by gaining information about customers and constantly communicating new products to them. A brief definition of ‘new service sector’ can be drawn from a World bank document, “The service sector produces ‘intangible’ goods, some well known – government, health, education—and some quite new – modern communication, information and business services”. This dissertation employs the term ‘new service sector’ to indicate (1) the newly increasing service sector in the time of ‘knowledge economy’, and (2) the newly emerging/developed sector after the reforms in 1978 China. Therefore, the ‘new service sector’ in this dissertation refers to finance, insurance, real estate, tourism, entertainment, information and consultancy, etc. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tertiary_sector_of_the_economy [Accessed in February, 2010] and http://www.worldbank.org/depweb/beyond/beyonddco/beg_09.pdf [Accessed in February, 2010].
interrupted in 1966. Between 1966 and 1971, higher education was suspended across the country. From 1971, universities and colleges were restored, but the system of ‘recommended by people and selected by leaders’ (qun zhong tui jian, ling dao pi zhun) was adopted instead of entrance exams. The group of ‘worker-peasant-soldier students’ was formed at this stage, which did not fade into history until 1977 when the scheme of university entrance examinations was officially restored. Among my interviewees, White and Hazel, who are aged above 50, went to university as ‘worker-peasant-soldier students’, so their experiences of university and migration are distinct from those of the other interviewees. The reforms in 1978 paid particular attention to higher education, focusing on regeneration of the old universities and the establishment of part-time higher education (Wang and Zhao, 2009). The year 1999 was a milestone leading to the prosperity of higher education, when the central authority decided to increase the number of university students. I was ‘lucky’ to have witnessed the boom as a fresh university student in that year. Students with lower scores than the university entry threshold could pay several tens of thousand yuan to become classmates of those with a more outstanding academic record. As a result, the number of students entering colleges and universities was 1.55 million in 1999, which increased by 43% from the previous year, and hit the record since 1949 in both the size of population and the increasing entry rate (ibid.). The massive population of university students is the immediate cause of the current problem of graduate unemployment. The positive consequence of the higher education expansion, however, is that a larger population has access to professional and managerial jobs and the education level of the middle class has generally improved. As suggested by Li and Zhang (2008) through analysis of the China General Social Survey 2006, higher education becomes highly correlated with income and social prestige.

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1 It is the scheme to select people to go to university at that time. The basic requirement is education level of junior school or equivalent, but the most important criteria are working class family background and communist consciousness. See Ma G.C. and X. Q. Zhao (2007) 高考年轮: 高考恢复三十年的民间观察 (the history of university entrance examination in China: thirty years after restoration of the university entrance examination scheme). Xinhua Press. Available from http://vip.book.sina.com.cn/book/catalog.php?book=42611 [Accessed in August, 2010].
2 During the time when university entrance exam was suspended, young people were selected from workers, peasants, army and ‘formation of production and construction’ (a special organisation integrated functions of army, government and enterprise) to go to university. Source: http://www.hudong.com/wiki/%E5%B7%A5%E5%86%9C%E5%85%B5%E5%AD%A6%E6%99%99%E5%91%98 and http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%96%87%E7%96%96%E7%9B%9F%E4%BA%A7%E5%BB%BA%E8%AE%BE%E5%85%B5%E5%9B%A2 [Accessed in February, 2010].
4 ‘College’ in China is different from in Britain. It is a university-level education, but with easier access, as it has lower requirement in academic performance and aims more at professions rather than academic careers.
It can be seen that the expansion of the contemporary middle class relies heavily on the economic and social reforms, and the middle class have benefited from the outcomes of the reforms, in terms of more job opportunities, higher income, higher education level and a more abundant consumer market. Since the reforms are being promoted nowadays, it could be anticipated that the country is taking at a direction positive to the middle class. Although their interests might be damaged due to the incomplete economic and social systems, the middle class in contemporary China, as the beneficiaries, still have every reason to believe their future is promising. This social context can thus explain why my interviewees are generally confident in their taste and satisfied with their life, while showing fewer concerns about anxiety or pressure in consumption.

**Characteristics of the contemporary middle class**

This section uses literature mainly from academic sources. Within the Chinese literature, Zhou Xiaohong and Wang Jianping are two influential scholars. Compared with their Chinese academic peers, they provide a more reliable estimation of the size of the middle class in China as well as a more refined analysis of their consumption patterns (see more details below). Based on a national survey, it is argued (Zhou, 2005; Wang, 2006) that the middle class, defined by occupation, income and education, account for 10.9% of the whole population; they display both extravagance and moderation in consumption and therefore show ambivalence to some extent. Although they share the same set of survey and interview data, Zhou and Wang made their contributions from different angles. Zhou revealed the consumption patterns and orientations of the middle class through comparisons with those of the lower class, while Wang pointed out the tensions in everyday consumption of the middle class. Although their studies focus exclusively on urban areas, especially the main big cities, it is a common weakness among empirical studies of the middle class and consumer culture, for the middle class are mainly distributed in the urban areas and consumer culture has not developed substantially in rural areas. A shortcoming of Wang’s and Zhou’s studies, also common in this field, is lack of theoretical construction. They have based their interpretations upon Western theories, but failed to ground their own theories in empirical analysis. That is why there are not many theories on consumer culture in Chinese scholarship that I can use to interpret my research findings.
Besides Zhou and Wang, several scholars from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and Tsinghua University are also important in the studies of the middle class in contemporary China. Lu Xueyi and Li Chunling, based in CASS, conducted a national survey in 2001 and published ‘the report on social class in contemporary China’ (2002). This report, for the first time in contemporary China, pointed out that working class and peasants are positioned at the bottom of the social class pyramid according to life chances and has hence provoked panic among the central authorities. Li Peilin, also from CASS, estimated the size of the middle class using the China General Social Survey 2006. The series of ‘China General Social Survey’\(^1\) are excellent datasets, which are also the first national survey open to the public. This thesis uses the survey in 2003 (more details will be addressed in chapter 5). Li Qiang, based in Tsinghua University, is also one of the reputable sociologists, whose major interest lies in social stratification. One of his contributions is the theory distinguishing the old middle class from the new middle class in China.

In addition to the academic sources, this dissertation also refers to a market research inquiry, conducted by Horizon Research, the leading market research company in China. The survey data was collected in 2002 with an urban representative sample, and the data is also reliable according to the definition of survey group and measurements. However, since it is a market research, the theoretical implications are insufficient and the survey sample is restricted to the urban residents.

Thus, it can be seen that the main literature employed by this dissertation is from the leading scholars and institutions in this field and the data are generally reliable. This section will start with conceptualising middle class by sociological theories, and then move on to the characteristics of the middle class in contemporary China.

*Conceptualising ‘middle class’*

Conceptualising class in this dissertation is concerned with how stratification analysis developed to study lifestyle and consumption. The class models created by Marx and

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\(^1\) The China GSS is an annual or biannual questionnaire survey of China’s urban and rural households aiming to monitor systematically the changing relationship between social structure and quality of life in urban and rural China. It is conducted jointly by the HKUST’s (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology) Survey Research Centre and the Sociology Department of People’s University of China (Renda). The project is led by Professor Bian Yanjie (HKUST) and Professor Li Lulu (Renda). See http://www.ust.hk/~websosc/survey/GSS_e.html [Accessed in February, 2010].
Weber are two most influential theories. Marx defines class in terms of employment relations, that is to say ownership of the means of production establishes an exploitative relationship. Thus, Marx’s class model can be understood as productivist, in which other domains of life, including consumption, are determined by ownership of means of production. Based on this mechanism, capitalist society as a whole is increasingly splitting up into two great hostile classes: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat (Marx, 1848). Therefore, Marx fails to locate ‘middle class’ or ‘intermediate classes’ in the society, who have a certain degree of control of means of production but are excluded from control over money capital. Unlike Marx, Weber argues that market mechanisms are responsible for social stratification, and classifies people according to their resources and their access to resources for obtaining welfare and well-being in the market (Sorensen, 1994). Weber does not think class, or economic wealth, is the supreme factor for social stratification. Rather, he suggests a stratification model combining class with status (reputation and esteem) and power (political power). This multi-dimensional approach is more efficient as a definition of middle class. The middle class consists of people who have some property but little education (the ‘petty bourgeoisie’ such as small shopkeepers and entrepreneurs) and people who have little property but can command high wages by virtue of their education and qualifications (the ‘intelligentsia and specialists’) (Saunders, 1990: 22). Thus, Weber proposes an important notion that social stratification does not rely solely on economic capital but also cultural capital and lifestyle. The relationship between one’s social position and education is thereby built up.

Cultural capital, if we adopt Bourdieu’s concept, acts as a social relation within a system of exchange that includes the accumulated cultural knowledge that confers power and status (Bourdieu, 1986). In terms of the important role of cultural capital in social stratification, Weber has great influence on Bourdieu’s view of social class. As suggested by Bourdieu (1984: 373), “social class is not defined solely by a position in the relations of production, but by the class habitus which is ‘normally’ (that is with a high statistical probability) associated with that position”. Habitus, explained by Bourdieu (1990: 53), is a ‘system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures’. As ‘structured structures’, habitus is defined by two main forms of capital: economic and cultural capital and helps reproduce these forms of capital. Economic capital is ‘immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the forms of property rights’ (Bourdieu, 1986: 3). Like Marx, Bourdieu recognizes economic capital as the fundamental factor, which is ‘at the root of all the other
types of capital’ and ‘the different types of capital can be derived from economic capital’ (1986: 12-13). Cultural capital is ‘convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications’ (ibid: 3). As ‘structuring structures’, habitus organises consumption and lifestyles, and tastes are the subjective realizations of the mechanism of habitus (Sassatelli, 2007: 92). Tastes function as ‘symbolic power’ through which ‘objective classifications’ come to coincide with ‘subjective’ ones, allowing for the ‘naturalization’ of social and cultural order (ibid: 94).

More recently, the work of Chan and Goldthorpe (2007a, 2007b) have also brought attention to the effects of status in social stratification. Although they reject Bourdieu’s argument about culture domination, their analysis shares with Bourdieu the highlighting of cultural capital and even social capital, in addition to economic capital, in the stratification of cultural consumption. Status positions are seen as “deriving from relations of social equality and inequality as expressed in more intimate forms of association and, in particular, in ‘commensality’ and ‘connubium’ – in who eats with whom and who sleeps with whom” (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007a: 377). The class structure, deriving from social relations in economic life, and the status order are understood as qualitatively different forms of social stratification (ibid.). Their research findings favour the omnivore-univore argument, that people in the higher social strata have a higher probability of participation in a wide range of cultural practices (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007a, 2007b). In the stratification of musical consumption, it is revealed that status is of greater importance than is class (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007b: 10). Furthermore, it is suggested that status operates independently in the stratification of cultural consumption in (1) theatre, dance and cinema, (2) music and (3) the visual arts, because status still often exerts an effect on the level and form of cultural consumption over and above the effects of education and income (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007a: 382).

Having reviewed the debates in social stratification, this dissertation still considers class, based on economic relations, as an important structure differentiating consumption practices, especially in the context of developing countries. It is argued that scales of ‘occupational status’ could measure basic similarities of life-style, because social and material circumstances are closely associated with occupational experience, and the scales may therefore also measure labour market outcomes associated with the system of production (Stewart et al.1980). The outcomes of labour market are particularly evident in developing countries, which can be seen from a large number of studies on the consumer
culture and consumption patterns of the middle class in market research, sociology and anthropology. Liechty’s (2003) work is a typical anthropological inquiry into the consumer culture of the middle class in developing countries. This study justifies the focus of middle class in Nepal by its distinguishing features, ‘its myriad forms of competing cultural capital, its ambiguous and anxiety-inducing relationship with the capitalist market, its intricate systems of dissimulation’, along with its increasingly dominant role in cultural process worldwide (ibid: 10). The Chinese middle class, with its special social status in contemporary society, also plays an important role in the emergence of consumer culture, which will be illustrated in chapter 4. Hence, based on the above literature, this dissertation studies the stratification of consumption practices based on class and focuses on the middle class in China.

The middle class in contemporary China

In the academic realm in China, there are also debates about conceptualising middle class and the scheme of social stratification. In 2005, the National Statistics Bureau operationalised ‘middle class’ as ‘medium-income household’ with annual household income between 60,000 and 500,000 yuan, and estimated the percentage of middle class households to be 5.4%1. The measurement by salary alone, however, is assumed unreliable, because it can represent neither employment relations nor cultural capital. Rather, many other Chinese scholars prefer a combined measurement based on occupation and including education and income (Zhou, 2005; Lv & Wang, 2003; Li & Zhang, 2008). This reflects the context of the transitional society, in which employment relations play central roles in people’s life chances, with education and lifestyles being less important in social stratification.

In a national survey of the Chinese middle class, Zhou (2005: 45) defines ‘middle class’ as technicians, civil servants, managers or business-owners with monthly income of 5,000yuan or above and university qualification or above, and it is revealed that the valid percentage of the middle class in urban China is 10.9%. By analyzing part of the samples in this survey, Wang Jianping (2007) finds that the middle class are clustered in the developed areas due to the economic disparities among regions. Among the middle class population, there are 34.1% in Shanghai, 24.4% in Beijing, 16.9% respectively in Guangzhou and Nanjing, and only 10.5% in Wuhan (ibid.: 109).

Li Peilin (Li & Zhang, 2008), using the China General Social Survey 2006\(^1\), estimates the scale of the middle class by a combined measurement of income, occupation and education, the same three dimensions\(^2\) with Zhou’s study. In his study, only 3.2% of the national populations are ‘core middle class’, and in total 12.1% of the population belong to the middle class, if adding the ‘half middle class’ (ibid.). It is also revealed that people who are closer to the ‘core middle class’ are more likely to identify themselves as ‘middle class’ (ibid: 17).

Li Chunling (2003) adopts a more complex measurement composed of income, occupation, consumption level, and subjective identity. The percentage of the middle class calculated by her, based on a national survey\(^3\) in 2001, is 4.1%, if only including people who are appropriate to all the four dimensions\(^4\) (Li, 2003: 7). It can be seen that the standard of income set by Li Chunling is lower than that used by Li & Zhang (2008), so the estimation by Li (2003) includes more population. That is why the scale of the middle class calculated by Li (2003) is close to that from Li & Zhang’s (2008) study, although Li & Zhang use the data collected five years later. Using the fifth census of national population in 2000, the number of the middle class in China is 35.185 million according to Li (2003).

Besides the definitions based on occupation and income, personal consumption has also been proposed as a measurement of social classes (Fan & Peng, 2005; Davis and Lu, 2001). This assumption exhibits the crucial role that consumption is thought to play in today’s Chinese society. However, it is rejected by Wang (2005a), who argues that this measurement would underestimate the scale of the middle class and leads to an illusory

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\(^1\) There are totally 7,063 respondents interviewed in 7,100 households, which are randomly sampled from 28 provinces.

\(^2\) Li Peilin divided each dimension into three levels—middle, lower middle and lower, and defined ‘core middle class’ as those appropriate to all the three ‘middle’ levels, ‘half middle class’ as those appropriate to any two ‘middle’ levels, and ‘marginal middle class’ as those appropriate to only one ‘middle’ level. Based on the survey data, ‘core middle class’ are non-manual occupations (managers, technicians, business owners and the self-employed), annual household income above 35,001 yuan with education of college or above.

\(^3\) There are totally 6,193 respondents randomly selected from 12 provinces, aged between 16 and 70.

\(^4\) Middle class occupations are government cadres, managers, business owners, specialised technicians and office clerks. Middle class income are personal monthly income above 1,250.02 yuan in developed cities/towns, above 631.79 in less developed cities/towns, above 741.02 in under-developed cities/towns, above 638.28 in developed rural areas, above 350.47 in less developed rural areas, and above 233.45 in under-developed rural areas. Li classifies household durables into four categories, 1) colour TV, refrigerator, and washing machine, 2) telephone, mobile phone, hi-fi stereo, disc player, air-conditioner, and microwave oven, 3) computer, video recorder, piano, and motorcycle, 4) private car. The ‘score of ownership of household durables’ is that owning any one from category 1 or 2 scores 1, owning any one from category 3 scores 4, and owning one from category 4 scores 12. Middle class consumption level is the ‘score of ownership of household durables’ above 6. Middle class identity is selecting ‘upper’, ‘upper-middle’ or ‘middle’ in the question of self-identification of social status.
image of the middle-class-way of life. Indeed, nowadays, consumption has become more individual rather than massified (Wang, 2006; Yao, 2005).

Although the objective measurements are dominant, identity as the subjective measurement is also adopted, especially by mass media. It is found that the identity of middle class is rather ambiguous among Chinese people (Wei, 2007). ‘There is no middle class in China!’ Wei Cheng, a journalist from Financial Times, has received such feedback during his interviews with people who are considered as middle class by the definition in Western societies. Some of them do not agree with the label of middle class, and even do not think the population of ‘Chinese middle class’ exist (ibid.). This situation also happens in my interviews. Some of my interviewees are confused by the label of middle class and asked me about the definition; some other interviewees whose income is not high are ambivalent with such an identity. There are, however, a few interviewees identifying themselves as middle class, although not all of them are happy to accept such a label. Nevertheless, I am not surprised at the confusions with class identity among Chinese people. After all, China has gone through significant economic and social changes in as little as thirty years and it takes time to establish a new system of class identity. Furthermore, people are resistant to be tagged as the culture becomes more individualised than before. The measurement based on subjective identity is therefore less reliable for estimating the scale of middle class population in China.

Having reviewed the size of the middle class in Chinese academic writings, this dissertation will move to the demographic characteristics of this group. As shown by Li Chunling (2003: 7), ‘among the middle class, 2/3 are males, nearly 3/5 are aged below 41, 3/5 are registered as urban residents, almost a half are employed by state-owned work units, more than a half’s education level is technical secondary school (zhong zhuan)1 and over, and their occupations are civil servants (1/10), managers (1/6) and business owners (1/6), specialised technicians (1/5) and administrative clerks (over 1/3).’

As reviewed above, the increase of multi-national companies in China is an important factor in forming the contemporary middle class, and a great number of professionals and managers work in a multi-cultural environment. Their lifestyles and values are thought to be analogous to that of the middle class in the West (Fu, 2004). The ‘petty bourgeoisie (xiao zi) taste’, ‘BOBOS’ and ‘LOHAS (Lifestyles of Healthy and Sustainability)’ are the

1 Equivalent to high school, but aiming at job training.
lifestyles embraced by the middle class. Xu (2003) even thinks that ‘middle class’ is more of an ambiguous concept of fashion and lifestyle, under the influence of market. He describes a picture of the middle class which helps to visualise the characteristics of this group, although it might risk holism and stereotype. They are generally aged around 30, dress elegantly, read various copperplate-printed fashion magazines, well-educated, with a good salary and a decent job, drive their own car or take taxis, often appear on golf courses, bowling alleys, Western fast food restaurants and other ‘smart’ places, attend various parties, and talk with occasional English words (Xu, 2003). Although Xu’s and Fu’s studies are vague in the definition of middle class, they highlight a distinguishing feature of the contemporary middle class - their new taste, very different from that of the middle class before 1978. However, the middle class is also ambivalent about the new taste. The judgement of taste has gone through changes from that presented in the existing studies, which will be shown in my dissertation.

According to the conceptions of middle class from sociological theories, employment relations are important to the outcomes of other life domains in transitional societies. This notion is also confirmed by the Chinese scholarship, the majority of which examine social stratification based on occupational measurements. Therefore, this dissertation also defines ‘middle class’ by occupation, including civil servants, professionals, managers and business-owners. The operationalisation of this definition will be illustrated in the empirical chapters. In the section that follows, this chapter will consider a wider social context of the rise of the middle class, which could shed light on the motive and background of the migration of the interviewees as well as their consumption patterns.

**Regional disparities, migration and housing policy**

Having reviewed the formation and the characteristics of the middle class, this section will further frame the background of this dissertation by referring to the economic disparities among regions, the history of geographic migration and the housing policy. These are crucial issues in the social transitions of China and impact life chances of the middle class. The discussion of these will also elucidate the potential for division between migrants and natives in the metropolitan cities.

**Regional economic disparities**
In terms of economic development, the country can be divided into four geographic zones as stated in the national ‘Eleventh Five-Year Plan’ for 2006-2010: (1) Eastern zone (10 provinces and cities), including Hebei, Beijing, Tianjin, Shandong, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong and Hainan; (2) North-Eastern zone (3 provinces), including Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang; (3) Central zone (6 provinces), including Shanxi, Henan, Anhui, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi Province; (4) Western zone (12 provinces and autonomous regions), including Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, Xinjiang, Chongqing, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, and Tibet (Wei, 2008). There was only 36.3% of the population in the Eastern zone in 2006, but the value of GRP (Gross Regional Product) accounted for 55.7%, the industrial added value accounted for 59.0%, the total fixed asset investment accounted for 49.7%, the actual use of foreign direct investment accounted for 87.3% and the exports accounted for 88.8% (ibid.). GRP per capita in the Eastern zone reached 3,518 U.S. dollars in 2006, while that of the Northeast, Central and Western regions are respectively 2,339, 1,573 and 1,403 U.S. dollars (ibid.). Therefore, the Eastern zone is the most developed area in terms of economic status, and the disparities between the Eastern zone and other zones are significant.

The economic segregations among the regions are firstly attributed to the uneven distribution of natural resources. The Eastern zone is generally along the coastal line with the advantage of shipping, while the North-Eastern, Central and Western zones are mostly inland areas, with forest and soils in some of the regions less fertile. Besides natural resources, policy also plays an important role in the formation of the regional differences. In 1980, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen, belonging to the Eastern zone, were designated as the experimental zone of the opening-up policy. These areas have greatly benefited from the earliest establishment of a free and open market, and continue to be one of the most highly developed regions. In 1984, another 14 cities along the coastal line and Yangtze River, most of which are in the Eastern zone, were warranted preferential policies in revenue and finance and sovereignty in trade and foreign investment (Li, 1996).

A third factor leading to the economic disparities is foreign investment. He Qinglian (2000) had anticipated that China’s entry into WTO would accelerate social polarization and regional disparities, as the developed provinces could make most of the opportunities offered by WTO membership enabled by their resources and capital, while the less developed ones could not. This theory is supported by later empirical evidence. According to the national economic census in 2004, foreign investment was highly concentrated in the
Eastern zone, where the salary in foreign companies was also higher than that in the Central (including the north-eastern zone) and the Western zone (Wang, 2007). It is now recognized that the uneven distribution of foreign investment is an important factor aggravating the economic disparities (Wang, 2007; Zhang and Wang, 2002).

In line with the above discussion, this dissertation focuses on the urban areas and defines metropolitan cities as the city districts of Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin in the quantitative analysis, and chooses Beijing for fieldwork. The three cities are central municipalities\(^1\) in China and are all located in the Eastern zone. In 2003, when the survey data was collected, the Gross Domestic Product of the three cities is at the top of the whole country (NBSC, 2004).

**The history of geographical migration**

Normally, regional disparities are the main driver for geographical migration, as people tend to move from less developed to more developed areas to get a better life. However, in the history of China, government policy used to function as the main engine for personal migration. It is generally considered that there have been three national-scale population migrations since 1949. The first one took place during the period of ‘Great Leap Forward’\(^2\), when a large number of peasants were recruited by urban manufacturing enterprises to develop the industrial economy (Yang, 2009). This movement ended with tens of millions being repatriated to rural areas from 1960, when the national economy reached the edge of collapse (Yang, 2009; Zhong, 2000). The second large migration commenced in 1968 when the movement of ‘go up to the mountain and go down to the village’\(^3\) was launched. During the peak of this movement between 1969 and 1971, 5,730,000 urban young people settled in the rural areas and were not allowed to move back to their urban hometowns until the late 1970s when the political situation began to change (Yang, 2009). This large population shift explains why the interviewees aged above 50 and some respondents in the

\(^1\) There are totally four central municipalities in China, and Chongqing is the fourth one. The four cities are directly under central government, unlike other cities which are under provinces. In the quantitative analysis, Chongqing is excluded from ‘the metropolitan cities’, and the reason will be specified in chapter 5.

\(^2\) It is a movement launched by China Communist Party between 1958 and 1960. The aim was to expand the economy and improve productivity, but the tasks were carried out in an impractical and reckless way so the country was left in economic chaos and in a disaster lasting three years. See http://baike.baidu.com/view/8601.htm [Accessed in February, 2010].

\(^3\) In this movement, China Communist Party called on young educated people to settle down in rural areas and get further education by working with peasants. http://baike.baidu.com/view/24902.htm [Accessed in February, 2010].
survey data had moved to suburban or rural areas in their 20s, before going back to their hometown in the urban areas.

The third large migration happened after the reforms of 1978, and the economic disparities among the regions became the main reason (Chen et al., 2008). The significant feature of this wave of migration is that population move from inner lands to the east coastal areas (Yang, 2009; Chen et al., 2008). At the beginning, the migration from rural to urban areas was allowed with conditions, in order to reduce urban employment pressure (Yang, 2009). The ‘Southern Talk’ by Deng in 1992, however, accelerated the reform. Therefore, the ‘peasant workers’ moving to the urban areas have dramatically increased, up to 4,461,000 in 1997, 9,400,000 in 2002, and 140,000,000 in 2007 which accounts for 11% of the total population (ibid.).

During the three national-scale migrations, the role of the ‘hukou’ (household registration) system cannot be ignored. The ‘hukou’ (household registration) system is a regulation which imposes strict limits on changing permanent place of residence for ordinary Chinese citizens, and can be dated back to the feudal society. After communist China was founded, the binary ‘hukou’ system was established to restrict free migration between rural and urban areas. The third migration symbolized by ‘peasant workers’ crowding into urban areas, however, has precipitated the reform of the binary ‘hukou’ system. For example, rural people who own a house or get a stable job in small cities can be registered as urban residents (Ma, 2008). And in the case of Beijing, migrants with better education or professional jobs are given priority in obtaining Beijing household registration.

The discussion about the economic disparities of the regions and the history of migration has elucidated the dynamic underlying the patterns of migration in contemporary China. It could thus justify concern about the divide between the migrants and the natives. Since Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin are among the most developed areas and the economic segregation between them and the other areas is significant, it is reasonable to hypothesize that consumption practices and consumer orientations might differ between people who are native to these areas and those who are not. The review of the background information has also framed the context of the interpretations from the interviewees, in particular relation to the metropolitan effects on consumption.

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1 People registered as peasants come to work in cities.
**Housing policy**

Besides the regional economic disparities and the migration experiences, the transition in the housing policy also has an impact on the consumption patterns of the middle class. Under the system of the planned economy, an individual’s house was allocated by work unit with very low rent, according to the family size and job rank. At the beginning of the ‘reform and opening-up’ the idea of developing a real-estate market as a stimulus to economy was put forward by the authorities. It was, however, not until 1998 when the state-allocating housing policy was officially suspended all over the country so that housing has gradually become a costly and unaffordable commodity. As house prices have climbed disproportionately since 2004, corruption and fraud in the real-estate industry has been condemned publicly. The huge profits gained by the real-estate developers were nevertheless justified by the market mechanisms\(^1\). The statements blustered by a real-estate tycoon at that time were typical; ‘the commercial housing is only provided for the rich, I don’t consider the poor’, ‘real-estate should be allowed for huge profits, which should be equally legalised\(^2\).

It can be seen that the process of housing reform is a good lens for viewing the tension between market mechanisms and social justice. The principle of profit-oriented and efficiency-first, indicated in market mechanisms, is a driving force for economic development, which could however aggravate social disparities without proper regulation.

In fact, the social welfare policies, including housing allowance and the scheme of ‘Economically Affordable Housing’ (EAH), had been drafted in the meantime when housing became commercialised, but failed to be implemented for various reasons. The scheme of EAH was initially targeted at lower-middle income households, who would be supplied with housing at a much lower price than market (Li and Wu, 2009). However, chaos ensued when the policy came into nationwide implementation in the early 2000s. First, the locations as well as the quality of the houses were not satisfactory. Second, as specified in the policy in 2004, the targets also include ‘those who are designated by the government’, so the EAH scheme might easily be abused as a privilege of civil servants and powerful people while poor households might be excluded (ibid.). It is found in my fieldwork that EAH is still one of the social benefits for civil servants nowadays.

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2 Ibid.
The transition in the housing policy could therefore shed light on the pressure and anxieties that are caused by the extraordinarily high house prices in Beijing and how the consumption of houses shapes household expenditure, which will be shown in the qualitative analysis chapters. This background also helps to decipher the differentiated patterns of housing consumption by generation, type of work institutions, migration and income, as will be articulated in chapter 7.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has been mainly concerned with the formation of the contemporary middle class, from which its social status and life chances are also detected. Because of the important roles that employment relations and economic wealth play in people’s life chances in China, this dissertation focuses on class in the study of social stratification and defines class as based on occupation. The middle class, as a social group with professional jobs, higher income and higher education level, benefits from the social and economic reforms initiated after 1978. This group is generally protected and privileged in post-reform China, even in the rigid household registration system. The reasons lie certainly in its great contribution to production and consumption, especially during the time of ‘knowledge economy’. They might also lie in its role in stabilising society, which however is less the concern of this dissertation. Thus, this chapter has outlined an important context for understanding the consumption patterns of the middle class, that is, for the confidence shown by the interviewees, the extent to which they celebrate the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort, the extent to which there is a divide between the migrants and the natives, and the shaping of their consumption by social changes.
Chapter 4 The emergence of consumer culture

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the emergence of consumer culture in contemporary China and is intended to establish a context for consumption patterns among the middle class. The discourse of consumption has gone through changes in the history of China, and this provides a clue to explain the emergence of consumer culture. The middle class and the metropolitan cities are two important drivers in the rise of consumer culture, which will be illustrated through several key studies. At the end of the chapter, sociological understanding of the consumption patterns will be presented with respect to consumer orientation and underlying social relations. Although the existing studies have not provided an explicit or in-depth analysis of the consumer culture, they help to outline the context of this dissertation and generate very helpful suggestions about how to understand features of consumption patterns and the complicated consumer orientation.

Emergence of consumer culture

Throughout pre-feudal and feudal China, frugality was deemed a virtue, so that consumption and life chances of merchants were restrained, as explained in chapter 3. However, as the commercial economy gained significant progress in the 10th century (Lu, 2004; Song, 2007), the consciousness of consumers among the urban citizens emerged, which can be seen from the increase in luxury and leisure consumption among the lower-middle class (Lu, 2004, Du, 2006). As a result, the official regulation of ‘hierarchical dressing’1 was compromised, and the growth of consumption was also a stimulus to the emergence of consumer culture (Du, 2006). Following the same ‘trickle-down’ effect as is supposed to take place in modern Western society (Simmel, 1908, cited in Gronow, 1997), the fashion of the upper class was also imitated by the lower class. In the 16th century, consumption had developed to such a level that demands began to drive production, as shown in the history of South Yangtze River area and Fujian (Song, 2006; Zhao, 2006). It is suggested that the commercial economy in the South Yangtze River area and Fujian, where consumption was more prosperous, was more advanced than the other parts of China (ibid.).

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1 The dress code for different social classes was different. Some colours were permitted only to the social elite or the emperor.
Therefore, the discourse of consumption, as opposed to frugality, began to be less moralised from the end of 16th century (Chao, 2002; Wang, 2001). This transition was also going on in the same period in Europe. For instance, consumption was conceived as the best incentive for economic growth (Smith, 1976(1776)) and frugality was not considered a self-justified merit (Mandeville, 1714, cited in Sassatelli, 2007). This social transition in China can be illustrated by the changing concept of ‘luxury’ at that time (Chao, 2002: 15-19): (1) leisure consumption was not strictly forbidden, and, on contrary, luxury goods became appreciated; (2) luxury consumption was justified through its impact on economic development, so the moral discourse turned to emphasizing the positive effects of luxury consumption, such as economic prosperity, labour market expansion, and wealth sharing; (3) merchants and their business as well as commercial activities aiming at wealth accumulation were justified, and the stereotype of merchants, which had been extravagant and greedy, was also adjusted.

In the late 19th century, when it was forced to open to international trade, Shanghai was quickly transformed into a consumer city. The residents were keen on conspicuous consumption and appreciated novel, fashionable and imported goods (Fan, 1994; Xu and Wang, 2005). This consumer orientation, however, had only emerged in the few metropolitan cities which were open to the West. By the first half of the 20th century, most of Chinese society remained at the stage of agricultural economy ¹, where frugality continued to be the dominant value (Yu, 2005).

Between 1949, when communist China was founded, and 1978, when the reforms commenced, society was rather egalitarian and the ideology of frugality was hegemonic. The famous slogan ‘three years for the new one, three years for the old one, and another three years for the patched one’ (xin san nian, jiu san nian, feng feng bu bu you san nian) is the best representation of the prevailing consumer orientation at that time ². Partly because of the scarcity of material resources during this period, frugality was advocated by the government as a way of highlighting its consistency with the communist values.

After the reforms of 1978, with the transition to a market-based economy, Chinese people began to have access to various material goods and society also became more stratified.

¹ Contrary to ‘commercial economy’.
² It means that a piece of clothing should not be discarded till it cannot be fixed any more.
Throughout the 1980s, however, Chinese consumers were left ambivalent as they were confused about the ‘apparent inconsistency between a communist legacy emphasizing austerity and equalitarianism and an emerging consumerist ethos celebrating individual hedonism and distinction-seeking through consumption’ (Zhao and Belk, 2008: 3). Soon after the spring of 1992 when Deng’s ‘Southern talk’ was released, the party began to actively encourage hedonism in order to transform people’s political zeal into sensational passions to be fulfilled through consumption (Ci 1994, cited in Zhao and Belk, 2008). No matter what role the government plays in the rise of consumer culture, consumption patterns as well as consumer orientations have dramatically changed since the shift to a market-based economy. The ideology which advocates a rising consumer culture, with constant adjustments though, has remained in the official discourse ever since (Zhao and Belk, 2008).

In contemporary society, the change of consumption patterns among Chinese people has been revealed by many studies in market and academic research. Through analysis of data from the National Statistic Bureau, it is found that household durables, rather than food, became the expenditure focus of the urban population during the period of 1985-1988, with an orientation to ‘spending the money due in the future’ (chao qian xiao fei) (Hang, 2007: 57). From 1995 until 2006, the expenditure share of healthcare, telecom, education and housing (excluding purchasing of houses) increased more significantly among the urban population (ibid: 59). At the micro level, as a result of rapid economic development (Li, 1996) and the growth of individual income (Lu, 1997), the purchasing power of Chinese people has been largely improved, which enabled them to pursue pleasure and comfort. Therefore, it is suggested that Chinese people became more enthusiastic for material goods and services that improve quality of life and the desire of Chinese consumers has been far more than basic goods (McEwen et al., 2006). The consumption of high-grade and fashionable goods in urban China, synchronized with developed countries, has developed into a lifestyle among the affluent group (Wang, 2005b). In terms of the changes in consumption patterns and the concomitant influences on various domains of social life, it is believed that a ‘consumer revolution’ is taking place in China nowadays (Davis, 2005; Davis (ed.), 2000; Wang, 2005b). A most significant social transition along with the emergence of consumer culture is the rise of consumer autonomy, i.e. more reflective and critical response to market and political sovereignty (Davis, 2005). The emergence of heterogeneous lifestyles and the increase of personal space have thus promoted individual freedom in social life (Wang, 2005b).
As stressed in existing literature, Chinese consumers seem to be keen on conspicuous consumption. For example, a luxury gift is a way to display an ability to pay (Wong et al, 1998:13). Symbolic value is attached to both luxury and ordinary items as long as they are imported (Zhou, 2003). However, the ‘personal orientations’, in other words buying out of physical and mental demands, has been ignored in the study of Chinese consumers. In this sense, Tsai’s research (2005) is valuable in bringing attention to the ‘personal orientations’, as opposed to the social dimension of ‘buying to impress others’. With cross-national empirical evidence, it is argued that the orientation of luxury-brand consumption also lies in self-directed pleasure, self-gift giving or congruity with internal self, in addition to social salience and social identification (ibid.). In Western scholarship, self-directed consumer orientations have also been less explored, although Campbell (1987, 1995) is a distinguished representative who stresses the hedonistic ethic among modern Western consumers.

The history of consumer culture shows that frugality as a hegemonic discourse had existed in Chinese society for thousands of years, so it has considerable impact on Chinese people. On the other hand, consumer culture has emerged and developed in contemporary China, although with an ambivalent reception from both the government and the people. The intersection between the new set of motives and the more traditional value of frugality in the consumption patterns of the middle class is significant for an understanding of the current situation.

Consumption patterns of the middle class

The middle class are widely believed to have significant impact on the emergence of consumer culture in contemporary China (Wang, 2007: 8). First, they are the most powerful group to drive consumption (Horizon, 2006: 462). Second, their consumption practices embody new tastes and new consumer desires (ibid: 5-6). The consumption patterns of the middle class, both their personal and household consumption, have thus attracted a lot of academic interest. In particular, against the background of the single child generation after 1980, the nature and extent of investment in children is a focus of existing studies. Thus, consumption practices of the middle class will be examined mainly through their personal consumption and investment in children. Based on the literature, this dissertation will also refer to the understanding of middle class taste by the mass media, to
see how the taste advocated by the market and the media intersects with people’s everyday life. This intersection is helpful to understand the material aspirations and tastes of the middle class, as will be analyzed in chapter 9, and will also shed light on the struggles in legitimate consumer orientation between the market, the political authorities and the consumers.

**Consumption practices of the middle class**

This section focuses mainly on personal consumption in the middle class, with regard to expenditure patterns, consumer preferences, organization of everyday life as well as the role of social interactions. Based on the existing literature, the taste of the middle class and their embedded consumer orientation can be inferred.

Through telephone interviews with 1,519 residents in the city areas of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Nanjing and Wuhan, Wang (2007) examines household expenditure structure, consumer preferences, ownership of durables and leisure consumption practices among the middle class in 2003. It is revealed that there is no significant difference in the expenditure share of children’s maintenance between middle class families and lower class families, but those of clothes, entertainment, housing and car are higher among middle class families (ibid: 122). 14.5% of middle class families own private cars, and 22.1% of them are potential consumers who are going to buy private cars in the near future. The percentage of the potential car consumers among the middle class is far higher than those among the lower class (ibid: 128). The middle class participate in leisure practices more frequently than the lower class, for instance going to the gym (ibid: 148). As regards consumer preference, both middle class and lower class people prefer high quality goods with lower price. The middle class, however, are more concerned with convenience, shopping environment, service and product quality, compared with the lower class (ibid: 125).

A study conducted by Horizon Research in 2002 also focuses on the distinguishing features of middle class consumers. The middle class is defined, taking into account economic disparities between regions, as those with household income above 5,000yuan per month, plus living in households with average disposable income above 3,000yuan per month in

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1 As reviewed in chapter 3, ‘middle class’ in this survey is defined as technicians, civil servants, managers or business-owners with monthly income of 5,000yuan or above and university qualification or above.
Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Nanjing or above 1,500 yuan per month in Wuhan, Chengdu, Xi’an, Zhengzhou, Dalian and Shenyang (Horizon, 2006: 463). According to this definition, 362 respondents are middle class, out of the total sample of 3,781 residents randomly selected from the above cities. Occupations of the middle class are mostly professional (119) or they are ordinary administrators (73), blue-collars¹ (36), retired or unemployed (49) (ibid.). As for leisure consumption, it is found that going to beauty/hair salon and going to cinema are common for both middle class and lower class people. However, leisure activities of higher cost or which symbolize Western lifestyles involve more middle class people. Differentiated participation can be described as (middle class vs lower class): going to the gym (23.7% vs 14.4%), going to Karaoke (21.2% vs 15.2%), going to pubs (19.4% vs 8.0%) and going to cafés (18.0% vs 7.4%) (Horizon, 2006: 468).

In terms of ownership of most household durables, middle class and lower class families are quite similar, and the significant divide lies in the ownership of private cars. Nearly 17% of middle class families own private cars, while only 1.5% of lower class families do (ibid: 472). In terms of patterns of leisure consumption and ownership of private cars, the findings from Horizon Research are consistent with those from Wang (2007).

However, most existing studies on consumption patterns of the middle class are shallow and remain descriptive analysis. None of them have paid attention to the subjective accounts of people’s tastes nor deciphered how the consumer orientation works in the Chinese context. Using interview data, my dissertation will demonstrate explicitly how the aesthetic of pleasure is tempered with the aesthetic of comfort in the justification of taste and how aesthetic justification intersects with moral justification.

The differences in consumption patterns between the middle class and the lower class indicate that consumption is stratified by social class, that is, a person knows where to go shopping and where to kill time according to his/her social class (Zhou, 2005). Middle class and lower class people have divergent preferences for shopping locations and leisure activities and have differential consumer priorities (Zhou, 2005; Wang, 2007). On the other hand, social relations are constructed by consumption, that is, people with similar consumption patterns are more likely to be close. In Zhou’s study (2005), two interviewees have become friends after several times of going shopping together, and their communication has also extended to relationship, work and children (ibid:86). As

explained by Zhou (2005: 86), this dynamic of social relations is distinct with that under the planned economy where social relations were mainly mediated by production relations: people working in the same place were more likely to be close. Social interaction is indeed an important component in forming people’s everyday practices. My dissertation will give a more comprehensive analysis of the role that social interaction plays in consumption, with respect to how everyday life is shaped by social interaction and how the middle class make judgment of other people’s taste.

As shown by existing literature on the personal consumption of the middle class, the pursuit of pleasure, comfort and identity is very significant. The next section will be mainly concerned with the investment in children. It will be shown in a preliminary way how the new elements in consumer orientation are tempered by social conventions by using material goods as a means of fulfilling family commitments.

**Family commitments and consumption**

Due to the convention of family commitment and especially the single child generation (since 1980), children play an important role in household consumption. Much existing literature considers a child as a proxy consumer, who displays the social status of the family. Despite debates over it, study of the investment in children among both middle class and lower class households is helpful in revealing the consumption patterns of Chinese people and can also imply their consumer orientation.

In research into *the lifestyle of the ‘new rich’ in China: a case study of youths in Guangzhou and Shanghai* (Fan, 2000), youths\(^1\) are conceived to be ‘the wealthiest consumers in China’, according to the ownership of ‘luxury goods’\(^2\). As explained by Fan, there are two reasons for luxury consumption by young people. First, parents or grandparents often encourage the younger generation to consume more as a demonstration of their economic status to potential marital partners. Second, some of the young people who have worked are positioned at the top of the income distribution in the society as a result of economic reform (Fan, 2000: 90). Fan’s research confirms the role of proxy

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\(^1\) Aged between 18 and 28.

\(^2\) These are relatively ‘luxury goods’ in the late 1990s and for young people. As revealed by the study, these include cassette recorders, sports bicycles, motorcycles, pagers, pure gold jewellery, luxury watches, cameras and credit cards.
consumer played by children and implies the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort among the young generation.

‘The consumer revolution in urban China’ edited by Davis (2000) is a superb collection of studies by both Chinese and Western scholars and covers a wide range of topics with empirical evidence. Due to the ‘one-child’ policy from the early 1980s, Davis and Sensenbrenner (2000) take consumption for singletons as a window to observe the transitions of the increasingly marketised society, and conclude that a ‘consumer revolution’ is taking place. As illustrated by Davis and Sensenbrenner (2000), an important reason for the affluent life of young people in China is the massive investment in the only child, in addition to the improved income of the whole society. Even if a family comes from the working class, parents would try their best to meet the needs of the only child to avoid leaving their child in a lower position than children from middle class families. This finding suggests that ‘the breakneck speed of development and the spectacular success in universalizing a one-child family plunged children and parents from all social strata into a consumer revolution’ (Davis and Sensenbrenner, 2000: 57). The proximity in the investment in children among middle class and lower class families is also confirmed by Wang’s (2007) study as mentioned before.

One of the motives for the massive investment in children, as shown by the above literature, is displaying family status. The role that children play in this context reminds me of the wives, who were dependent on husbands, in 18th century England. Before the consumer revolution, the ostentation of men’s wealth was through the number of servants they employed. However, this changed to luxury consumption conducted by their wives of luxury furniture and housing decorations, in the period of the consumer revolution (Sassatelli, 2007). The role that wives play in vicarious consumption can shed light on the luxury consumption by young children in today’s China, which is also going through a ‘consumer revolution’. However, there is debate over whether status-display is the main motive of consumption for children. My thesis will discuss the investment in children from the perspective of material culture theories, and seek explanations in specific context and subjective accounts. It will be demonstrated how consumption for children manifest social relations and imply consumer orientation.

The great investment in children, however, does not mean that parents do not consider their own consumer desires. Parents indulge children with frequent purchases of small treats but
spend extravagantly on themselves as well, such as on custom-tailored clothes, mobile phones and holidays (Davis & Sensenbrenner, 2000). In consistence with this finding, my dissertation will further enquire whether there are any changes in parents’ consumption for themselves in the recent decade and whether there are any changes in emphasis of consumption for children. It will also relate family commitment to the justification of consumption, by which a comprehensive analysis of consumer orientation can be obtained.

*Understanding of middle class taste*

In the sphere of media, there is a struggle over the understanding of middle class taste. On the one hand, the media is inclined to emphasize ‘luxurious’ and ‘Western’ to influence consumer decisions. On the other hand, it also began to pay attention to the knowledge of appreciation and appropriation of material goods, in order to cater for different demands from different consumers. The middle class, with higher economic capital and lower cultural capital, are eager for the knowledge to cultivate good aesthetic taste; while those with lower economic capital and higher cultural capital need the publicized knowledge to justify their taste. This section aims to explore how and why the media are keen on ‘luxurious’ taste and what the interaction or struggle between consumers and the media implies.

In an issue near Valentine’s Day of 2008, Beijing Youth Weekly (BYW), a very popular magazine on fashion and lifestyle, was full of gift ideas for ‘her’: CARTIER, CHANEL, BVLGARI, TIFFANY, PRADA and other less well-known but equally expensive brands of jewellery, fragrances, accessories, and skin care products. Not only luxury products, but luxury holidays and restaurants were also introduced as alternatives on Valentine’s Day. In one article, Marilyn Monroe, a past fashion heroine in the Western world, was cited to justify women’s passion for jewellery. The luxury culture advocated by the mass media is based on the fact that in today’s Beijing more and more luxury goods have become available and the market keeps expanding. In 1989, only two shopping centres were open exclusively for luxury brands and were located in areas where ordinary people would never go. In 2005, one more luxury shopping mall, Meimei Department Store, was established in Xi Dan, the traditional shopping area of the city; in 2007, two more luxury shopping malls, Xin Guang and Jin Rongjie shopping centre, were located separately in eastern and western Beijing. PRADA, GUCCI, CHANEL and other designers have set their flagship stores in

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1 Beijing Youth Weekly, published on 2008.01.31, ISSN1005-3549.
Xin Guang, which promises that their products would keep to a ‘zero time lag’ with those overseas.

A question hereby arises: who is learning the ‘luxury culture’? In other words, who are the target population of such a taste advocated by media and market? As described by itself, BYW is dedicated to ‘promote luxury products and services into a way of life’, and aims at ‘wealthy and powerful young and middle-aged people’. Therefore, Wang Shi, President of a leading private real estate company in China, is used as celebrity endorsement (in the advertisement, Wang invests a huge amount of money in climbing and gliding)\(^1\). What is interesting is that the terms of ‘powerful people’ and ‘social elite’, rather than ‘middle class’, seem preferred by the media and advertisement. One reason is that ‘middle class’ in contemporary China is an ambiguous term, which has been discussed in chapter 3. Meanwhile, ‘powerful people’, ‘mainstream people’, ‘successful men’ and ‘social elite’ can be understood easily by consumers and also have the exaggerating effects that are demanded by advertisement. However, ‘middle class’ in this dissertation are defined as professionals, managers, business-owners and civil servants who own either considerable wealth or reputation or power or all of them. According to this definition, it can be affirmed that the target population of the ‘luxurious’ culture constructed by media and market is just the middle class, who are the beneficiaries of the reforms after 1978.

Besides promoting consumerism and hedonism, the media in Beijing also highlight knowledge about material goods and cultivation of tastes. This interest can be seen from the similar themes like ‘living with luxury’ used by a great many fashion magazines, although with varied focuses. Examples are, the Chinese edition of COSMOPOLITAN, defining itself as ‘the most tasty magazine for women’\(^2\); ESQUIRE, providing ‘life and consumption guide for successful men’\(^3\); and TRADINGUP, ‘elevating the principles of how to appreciate luxury goods (jun zi ai she, chi zhi you dao)’\(^4\). The material culture advocated by the media actually reflects the demands of the middle class, especially those with high economic capital but low cultural capital. They are not satisfied with owning consumer goods any more but are eager for knowledge about how to appropriate and

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\(^1\) See Beijing Youth Weekly, published on 2008.01.31, ISSN1005-3549.
appreciate material goods and how to develop their own tastes.

Furthermore, in the context of China, knowledge of appreciation of material goods also functions as justification of tastes, to deal with the tension between material aspirations and purchasing power. The fact is that, although the media and the market advocate a consumer culture of extravagance and luxury, not all middle class members can afford them or can frequently purchase them, because they are under various constraints. The tension between material aspirations and purchasing power is also pointed out by Wang (2006) as one of the dilemmas of the middle class in the transitional society, which will be discussed later. In consequence, a strategy that is often adopted is that people equip themselves with relevant knowledge to select ‘the most appropriate’ luxury goods according to their purchasing power and taste. Meanwhile, they denounce the taste of the rich who usually own large quantity of luxury goods but do not know how to appreciate them. Against this background, LIFESTYLE produced a special issue of ‘New Luxurism (NW)’, attempting to seek justification of taste for the middle class, especially the young middle class whose disposable income is usually low. With the slogan of ‘refusing the use of luxury goods for ostentation’¹, NW celebrates the taste for gaining pleasure from material goods and services. It can be seen that knowledge of material goods and cultural dispositions, to some extent, serve as a buffer in this tension, by manifesting that abundant economic resources do not necessarily lead to good taste. Issues about ‘judgement of taste’ will be articulated in chapter 9.

In summary, the understanding of middle class taste by the media and the market in contemporary China has placed emphasis on luxury culture, in order to maximize commercial interests. In such an atmosphere, it is not surprising to find the pursuit of pleasure and comfort among my interviewees and that the tastes of some interviewees appear similar to those of the Western middle class. Another discourse of taste circulating in the media and the market is highlighting appreciation and appropriation of material goods, which reflects the intersection between the ideology of consumer culture and people’s everyday life. The emergence of this discourse not only caters for the demands of the consumers who become more ‘sophisticated’ in material culture, but helps to justify the tastes of the middle class who have to cope with the tension between material aspiration and purchasing power. It can be seen that although frugality has been the legitimate

consumer orientation in traditional culture, there are struggles in legitimate consumer orientation in contemporary society. The discourse of ‘encouraging consumption’ aligned with emphasis on moderation shows social regulations from the political authorities, the discourse of ‘luxury consumption’ shows sovereignty of the market, while the discourse of ‘appreciation of material goods’ attempts to resist both but promotes sovereignty of the consumers. The struggles in legitimate consumer orientation implies that the middle class become more and more autonomous in their consumption, rather than manipulated by market, media and political authorities as supposed by some literature.

So far, it is evident that the middle class are central to the rise of the consumer culture in contemporary China. They participate in consumption practices more extensively than the lower class, and are the target that the media and the market aim to impress. On the other hand, consumption practices also structure the everyday life of the middle class. They gain pleasure and comfort by purchasing and using material goods, and also fulfil family commitments through consumption for family members. The section that follows will briefly review the literature on the consumption practices in the metropolitan cities, to outline the context of the experiences of the interviewees.

**Consumption in the metropolitan cities**

Existing Chinese literature about consumer culture in contemporary China focuses mainly on the urban areas (e.g. Wang, 2007; Huang, 2003; Liu, 2007; Davis and Sensenbrenner, 2000). For cultural and historical reasons, the consumer culture in the urban regions is differentiated and consumer culture most flourishes in the affluent areas, especially the metropolitan cities (Huang, 2003; Liu, 2007).

Based on cultural, economic and geographical characteristics, Liu (2007) divides mainland China into seven big regions, and studies the regional patterns of consumer culture through a stratified sampling survey in the urban areas of these regions. Liu concludes that, in general, consumers in the Northeast and Southwest tend to be more conservative, easily influenced, and less conscious of their own preferences (Liu, 2007). This consumer orientation is associated with the relatively under-developed economic status of these areas. Consumers in the North, the Middle and the Northwest combine the orientations of hedonism, ostentation and traditional frugality (ibid.). The reason is the more developed economic status and the considerable influence of traditional values (ibid.). The Southeast
and the South are two most developed regions, but display distinct consumer orientations (ibid.). In the Southeast, hedonist orientation and impulsive consumption are prominent, in contrast to the traditional values (ibid.). In the South, however, the traditional values of frugality and moderation are common, and people tend to be more conservative than the Southeast population (ibid: 198-207). As interpreted by Liu, the differentiation between the two regions has historical reasons. Although both of them have long been influenced by Western culture, the Southeast had a less strong cultural basis of its own before interacting with Western culture, while the South had a firm belief in Confucian culture before opening up to Western countries (Liu, 2007: 203-207).

These findings on the regional patterns of consumer culture are illuminating. It is revealed that the consumer culture is more prevalent in the affluent urban areas, especially the metropolitan cities. It also confirms the interaction between imported culture and indigenous culture in globalisation. Liu’s research can help to explain the focus of my dissertation on the metropolitan cities and the background of globalisation, and also provides a good perspective, on the historical and cultural context, for analysis of the data. However, the sampling frame and the selection of proxy respondents in the survey are not demonstrated clearly, so the reliability of the findings is affected to some extent.

Existing Chinese literature about consumption patterns in the metropolitan cities is mostly theoretical speculation lacking empirical evidence or based on aggregated data. There are several studies based on survey data concerning female consumers and high-income groups, but the reliability of the data is a problem.

According to several surveys conducted by CHINA YOUTH DAILY (CYD), females in the urban areas tend to be autonomous consumers, who are described as pursuing identity, emotional outlet, pleasure and status in consumption (Chen, 2008). Although the data from CYD is hardly reliable, the findings are helpful to obtain a preliminary picture of the Chinese urban female consumers and have also detected the new motives of consumption in contemporary society.

New features of consumption as well as the underlying motives are also found in a survey targeting young middle class females\textsuperscript{1} in four big cities, Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu\textsuperscript{1} and

\textsuperscript{1} As defined by the study, it means women who work in foreign companies, state organs and government agencies, with personal income above 2,500yuan per month in Beijing and Shanghai and above 1,500yuan
According to the data on clothing consumption, this study (Xu and Zhao, 2002) reveals that (1) impulsive shopping is significant, 67% out of 1,050 total respondents; (2) the sale season is not appealing to the female middle class. Instead, the highest percentage of women from Shenyang purchase clothes ahead of season, which indicates that women in Shenyang are more fashion-conscious in clothes shopping. Shopping locations for the female middle class tend to be mega shopping malls, department stores and franchised stores. The more extravagant investment in clothes and designer goods in the northeastern areas (e.g. Shenyang) is also mentioned by several of my interviewees, which might suggest that people in these areas are particularly keen on conspicuous consumption.

Another survey aims to investigate lifestyles of the ‘high-income class’ in urban China. Based on over 500 samples selected from four big cities (Shanghai, Shenzhen, Nanjing and Changsha), it is revealed that food accounts for only 20% in the total household expenditure, while service consumption, e.g. education, entertainment and tourism, accounted for 7% to 10% in total (Chen, 2002). Almost all high-income households own color TVs, refrigerators and telephones, and the percentage of the population who own credit cards, mobile phones and precious metals is also high (Chen, 2002). The reasons for saving money in the four cities are very interesting. The top three purposes are ‘emergencies’, ‘child education’ and ‘well-being after retirement’ (‘child education’ is replaced by ‘investment’ in Shenzhen, reflecting the commercial atmosphere in the special economic zone) (ibid.). This research highlights the distinguishing features of the consumption patterns in the urban areas: self-fulfillment and ‘spending the money due in future’ (chao qian xiao fei) (ibid.). The latter feature, i.e. debt consumption, is particularly significant in Shenzhen, according to Chen (2002). The orientation to self-fulfillment, highlighting personal pleasure and comfort, has pivotal implications to my dissertation.

The above literature shows that the metropolitan cities are an important site of the emergence of consumer culture. The consumer culture in the metropolitan cities is significantly characterized as a new set of motives, including pursuit of pleasure, comfort,
identity and status, and the rise of debt consumption. So far, the consumption patterns among Chinese people are found to be mainly differentiated by social class, age, area of residence and income. Based on the literature review, the quantitative analysis will map the consumption patterns in contemporary China in relation to these demographic variables.

**Sociological understandings of the consumption patterns**

There are sociological reflections on consumption patterns in Chinese scholarship, mainly through analysis of consumer orientation and the social relations underlying consumption patterns. Throughout the above review, the consumer orientation of Chinese people, especially those in the metropolitan cities, has been subjected to preliminarily discussion. However, only Wang and Zhou have given more systematic articulation of the consumer orientation among the middle class. Another body of literature seeks understanding of the consumption patterns from the embedded social relations, among which there is a debate over the group-affiliated self or the independent self. This section will end with the model of social relations from Fei Xiaotong (1992), the most influential sociologist in China. His model will be used to interpret the findings in this dissertation in addition to the Western framework reviewed in chapter 2.

**The consumer orientation**

Chinese scholars have made substantial efforts to understand the middle class consumers, whether they have adopted a new consumer orientation or remain frugal to a large extent. This is a main debate in the field of consumer studies in Chinese scholarship. Based on empirical evidence, Zhou and Wang both agree that the middle class are ambivalent with either frugality or consumerism, and there are several tensions in their consumption. The argument made by Wang (2007: 136) is more emphatic that the consumer orientation of the middle class is in a tremendous transition, from traditional frugality to modern consumerism.

As reviewed in chapter 3, Zhou’s and Wang’s studies are based on the same national survey on the middle class in 2003, which inquired into their identity, consumption, lifestyles, social network, education and cultural life, taste, political participation and interaction with media. According to Zhou (2005), the attitudes of Chinese middle class consumers can be described as contradictory, which combine extravagance with moderation, and the middle
class make efforts to keep balance between them. In Zhou’s terms, they ‘spend the money due in future’ (chao qian xiao fei) ¹ and aspire to ‘being rational’ (2005: 72). As regards the proposition ‘it is necessary to spend the money due in future’, 43% of middle class respondents think it appropriate, while only 29% of lower class respondents think so (ibid: 73). It is explained that this attitude is enabled by the steady jobs and income among the middle class (ibid: 73). Moreover, 61% of middle class respondents think the statement appropriate that ‘it is wiser to earn and spend than to be frugal and save’, and only 44% of lower class respondents think so (ibid: 74). The findings imply that the orientation to fulfilling personal pleasure, comfort and identity through use of material goods has been widely accepted by the middle class as well as a proportion of lower class people. Chinese consumers, however, are ambivalent on excessive and conspicuous consumption. As found by Zhou (2005: 74), the traditional orientation to frugality has not been entirely discarded. Only a small portion of middle class respondents (25%) agree with the assumption that ‘imported goods are better than domestic-produced goods’, and only 31% of middle class respondents agree with the supposition that ‘extravagant consumption is the symbol of successful people’ (Zhou, 2005: 73). It also turns out that there is no significant difference between the middle class and the lower class in the two statements (ibid: 73). However, the judgment of frugality has gone through changes among the middle class. It is found that a purchase is not extravagant as long as it is affordable, no matter how high the price is; and frugality should not be simply equal to saving money as its traditional meaning, but rely on various financial strategies to expand income sources (ibid: 98). This connotation, as explained by Zhou (2005: 98), is understandable because life chances of the middle class have increased in contemporary society, in contrast to the times when material resources and market opportunities were scarce so frugality was deemed a virtue.

Hence, in the light of Zhou’s research, the dialectical image of middle class consumers is obtained that they celebrate some new motives of consumption but also remain frugal and moderate. This finding requires adjustment of the one dimensional image of the ‘new rich’ in China, who tend to be recognized as being extravagant and conspicuous. Compared with the descriptive analysis of Zhou’s, Wang’s study is more reflective and has more depth. Wang (2006) focuses on the tensions among the middle class consumers, which are argued to have shaped the consumption patterns in such a transitional society. The tensions are between (1) extravagance and frugality, (2) passion and rationality, (3) sovereignty and passiveness, (4) high culture and popular culture, (5) self identity and social identity.

¹ Purchasing houses, cars and other material goods by loans, defined by Zhou.
The essence of the first two tensions is the conflict between material aspiration and purchasing power, which is shared with consumers in Western countries. However, they also suggest the particular situation in China that the new values, emphasizing satisfaction brought by use of material goods, can be reconciled with traditional values, emphasizing the virtue of being content with one’s lot. This intersection explains the feature of the middle class that, unlike their peers in Western society, there is a tendency to use debts within affordability, with the anticipation that they will be able to pay it back in the future, as revealed by the empirical study (Wang, 2006: 142).

The tension between sovereignty and passiveness is associated with the social changes in the three decades after 1978 and the impact of globalization (ibid: 142). Chinese consumers gradually gained sovereignty along with the development of a market-based economy. They are, however, still influenced by the experiences of material scarcity and the planned-economy which might constrain their consumer sovereignty in some extent. Furthermore, against the background of globalization, the middle class have also encountered the consumer culture, which have imposed various symbols onto their consumption and left them to struggle with ‘insatiable’ material desires.

The last two tensions, appearing similar with those among Western consumers, are actually more related to the short history of the contemporary middle class. As reviewed in chapter 3, the ‘new middle class’ emerged after 1978 and is only 30 years old. Therefore, Wang (2006: 142) concludes, based on his observation and the empirical data, that a new ‘high culture’, even a collectively appreciated culture, has not been established, which has also led to difficulty in shaping class identity. In addition, the constant changing lifestyles and tastes promoted by the media and the market make certain high culture less likely to dominate. Due to the same reason of short history of the ‘new middle class’, the tension between self identity and social identity could also be explained. In addition, this might intensify the tension between individuality and universality of taste. When the middle class appreciate the freedom to express their own identity through consumption, they cannot always feel confident in their taste if they lack a class identity or culture as a reference. Nevertheless, as Wang affirms (2006:142), the middle class, like their peers in the Western societies, generally differentiate their taste from that of the lower social class. It can be seen that taste also creates social boundaries in contemporary China.
Wang’s study relates the features of the middle class consumers with more sociological concerns, which helps to construct a theoretical framework to analyze the consumer culture in China. However, Wang does not build up a clear connection between the arguments and the empirical evidence, which makes his assumptions quite ambiguous. The arguments on consumer orientation are not elaborated sufficiently either, such as how the new values are tempered by traditional values, what the relations are between the tensions, and how the middle class cope with the tensions. Furthermore, a common problem for both Wang’s and Zhou’s studies and even for many other existing studies is the taken-for-granted assumption about the influence of Western culture onto the middle class and the attribution of the new set of motives to ‘consumerism’ or ‘hedonism’. First, there is no empirical evidence that the new motives and orientations are homogenous with ‘consumerism’ or ‘hedonism’, the discourses originated and developed in the West. Second, as stressed in chapter 2, in the process of globalization local culture is not a passive recipient but struggles with and even transforms imported culture. In addition, another common problem of many existing studies is that there is no explicit demonstration of how the survey data and the interview data are analyzed and how the arguments are constructed.

My dissertation, by adopting a dynamic and interactive view of globalization, will provide a more adequate analysis of the consumer orientation. Based on more explicit methods of analysis and theoretical frameworks, my dissertation will decipher consumer orientation from the angle of the justification of taste, that is, how the middle class make sense of their tastes and how they feel confident with their consumption. It will also interpret the consumer orientation from the essence of Chinese culture and in relation to social changes and social conventions, which makes the analysis more comprehensive. Consumption patterns of the middle class will be formulated from the dimensions of everyday consumption, taste and material culture. Thus, the arguments about consumer orientation and the concomitant anxieties will be established upon convincing empirical evidence. In consequence, the dynamic of how the new consumer orientation operates in China can be appreciated.

The embedded social relations

For a long time, the ‘collective’ model of social relations dominated scholarship, and was used to interpret the consumption behaviour of Chinese people. The collective mode posits that the group-affiliated mode of self-identity in the Confucian society leads to the ‘face’
concept, which stresses the obtaining of self-identity from other people’s perceptions (Wong et al, 1998: 8). According to this theory, Southeast Asian consumers are thought to place emphasis on publicly visible possessions, while Western consumers place greater importance on hedonic experiences (ibid). Take gifts as an example. A gift is an important way to acquire luxury goods in China, because luxury goods are considered particularly appropriate for gifts (Wong et al, 1998: 13). Giving away expensive items brings honour to the gift sender by displaying his or her ability to afford the gift (ibid.). Wong’s research findings are quite consistent with the stereotype of the contemporary Chinese consumers. There are, however, disputes over the applicability of this collective model.

By selecting 276 samples from a market survey on a type of premium alcohol (more than 580 yuan per bottle), one study examines the concept of self and its implications to luxury consumption in China (Zhu, 2006: 1). It finds that contemporary Chinese consumers emphasize both independent self and interpersonal self, while they are weak at the group dimension (collectivism) (ibid: 137-138). As interpreted by Zhu (2006), the findings are associated with the influence of the traditional social structure and Confucian culture. The former, characterized by self-sufficiency, shapes the independent self, while the latter, emphasizing the unification between individual and society, shapes the interpersonal self. Therefore, Chinese consumers pay attention to both the social attributes of consumption - status-display and social identity, and the personal attributes of consumption - pleasure and comfort (ibid: 143).

The model of social relations with a strong dimension of independent self was initially proposed in the 1940s by Fei Xiaotong. Throughout years of field work in a town of Jiangsu Province and analysis of Chinese histories and cultures, Fei (1992) describes the social relations in Chinese society to be ‘differential mode of association’ (cha xun ge ju). This model of social relations is essentially self-centred, as it is ‘composed of distinctive networks spreading out from each individual’s personal connections’ (Fei, 1992: 71). According to Fei (1992), the pattern of social relations in Chinese society can be illustrated as concentric circles with the same centre of ‘self’ and all the social relations are arrayed in each circle, although the boundary of these overlapping networks is often inexplicit and alterable. The closeness of relationship relies on both social norms and personal prescribed obligations, so the patterns of social relations could vary between individuals (ibid.).
Below is an example of social relations using the model of ‘differential mode of association’ by Fei (1992):

Figure 4.1 An example of social relations using the model of ‘differential mode of association’ (Fei, 1992)

In the light of Fei’s model, the nature and the extent of commitment to family or friends are determined by the perception of the ‘tie’, based on social norms and personal prescriptions. The differential mode of association is also embodied in the consumption practices of my interviewees. Relatives are usually placed in more distant circles than parents and their own core families, similar with the situation in figure 4.1. More significant is the fact that the rule how one orders his/her social connections is quite clandestine and subtle and sometimes in flux. For instance, one of my interviewees (Joyce) has bought herself many luxury goods, but is going to invest more in her son as she feels guilty about the excessive expenditure for herself only. Charlie buys various consumer goods for his aunt but provides limited help to the children of his aunt, as he does not feel obliged to sponsor them. Fei’s model is also efficient for explaining the limited enthusiasm for donation and charity among my interviewees. As interpreted by Fei (1992), the ambiguous boundary of social networks leads to a blurred boundary between public and private. The state and the public are additional circles that spread out like ripples from the splash of each person’s social influence (ibid: 70). So the primary concerns of Chinese people are generally the
welfare of their families and parents while that of strangers and the public are placed farther away.

Although Fei’s theory was established over 60 years ago, it has been widely used in contemporary studies of culture and social networks. As to my dissertation, the model of ‘differential mode of association’ provides a good theoretical angle, in the realm of endogenous factors, to interpret the consumption patterns of the middle class.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the emergence of consumer culture in contemporary China. According to the existing literature, the emergence of the middle class and the growth of metropolitan cities are two forces crucial to the rise of consumer culture. The literature review in this chapter has further framed the social and national context of my thesis, and found out several useful theoretical angles to interpret my findings. However, through examination of the existing scholarship, it is found that there is neither a satisfactory analysis of how the middle class think about their own tastes and consumption nor of consumer orientation among the middle class. A reason, as mentioned in chapter 2 in relation to Chinese culture, might be that individual ‘justification’ was traditionally absent, as the behaviour rules were prescribed by society in accordance with social roles. Therefore, this dissertation is devoted to filling in this gap in knowledge. It will analyze the survey data to outline a background for this dissertation. It will thereafter dissect the interview data following literal, interpretive and reflexive logic. Based on the theories about everyday life, taste and material culture, this dissertation will analyze consumption patterns and embedded consumer orientation from multiple dimensions and construct arguments about the patterns of taste and operation of the consumer orientation in the Chinese context.
Chapter 5 Research methodology

Introduction

This thesis is based on empirical research. It collects data on consumption patterns of the Chinese middle class and seeks to explain the patterns in relation to social structure and social context. This dissertation uses mixed methods, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods has been widely used in the study of consumer culture and proved to be productive in achieving coherence of interpretations (see Bennett et al., 2009; Silva et al., 2009; Warde & Martens, 2000; Zheng, 2006). The reason why researchers mix quantitative and qualitative methods is because of the assumption that society is multi-faceted, multi-layered and multi-perspectival, which has been recognized by most social researchers, as summarized by Pawson (2008: 120). Therefore, forms of inquiry are required which are capable of fusing various forms of available evidence and uniting the current diversity of research perspectives (ibid.). Based on this philosophical assumption, researchers mix the two methods for specific research purposes and justify this methodology by different rationales. As identified by Bryman (2008: 91-92) based on an extensive review of a sample of journal articles, the majority conduct mixed methods research for ‘Enhancement’ (making more of or augmenting either quantitative or qualitative findings by gathering data using a qualitative or quantitative research approach), ‘Completeness’ (it is possible to bring together a more comprehensive account of the area of enquiry if both quantitative and qualitative research are employed), and ‘Triangulation’ (quantitative and qualitative research might be combined to triangulate findings in order that they may be mutually corroborated).

However, from the traditional viewpoint, there is a ‘chasm’ between quantitative and qualitative methods, on account of the incompatibility of their ontology and epistemology, which makes the methodology of mixing methods difficult to justify. Conventionally, quantitative methods, associated with positivism, understand the world by accumulating ‘objective’ observations. Qualitative methods, linked with constructionism, are dedicated to uncovering the meanings and interpretations, motives and intentions.

Nevertheless, the division between quantitative and qualitative methods does not lead to invalidity of a combination of the two methods. Just as argued by Bryman (2001), research
methods are much more ‘free-floating’, in terms of epistemology and ontology, than is often supposed. For instance, qualitative research is likely to be associated with empiricism and realism, to explain the world through observable phenomena in relation to underlying structures and mechanisms; and quantitative research may be associated with interpretivism and constructionism, to discover meanings, motivations, interpretations and rules that provide orientations for people’s actions.

This notion is more systematically articulated by Bergman (2008), who suggests an alternative to mixed methods research design. According to Bergman (2008: 14-15), the traditional labour division of quantitative and qualitative methods should be dispelled and the premises of mixed methods research design, which are based on the distinct labour division, are false. The fact is that each exercise of quantitative or qualitative methods varies tremendously and it is difficult to attribute distinctive characteristics for the whole family of quantitative methods or qualitative methods. Based on this assumption, Bergman (ibid: 17) suggests two key principles in mixed methods research. One is to distinguish data collection methods (e.g. unstructured narrative interviews, survey research based on closed-ended questions) from data analysis methods (e.g. qualitative content analysis, Foucauldian discourse analysis, quantitative content analysis, structural equation modelling). Therefore, researchers may select different positions to understand their data in conjunction with the specific research question, rationale and aims (ibid: 15). This is the second principle. Consequently, the decision on whether the researcher deals with an objective reality or a constructed reality, or hypothesis testing or exploratory analysis is unrelated to whether patterns in the data are detected via statistical analysis or otherwise (ibid: 16).

Although the complete rejection of the divide between quantitative and qualitative methods may be rather extreme, the assumptions from Bryman and Bergman are very illuminating. They have not only provided consistent solutions to the problems of how to justify mixed methods research, but increased the possibilities of mixed methods research design. The review of the debates also reminds researchers to choose an appropriate strategy to link the data analytically and choose appropriate data analysis methods, according to research purposes, forms of data and even qualities of the researcher.

For this dissertation, the demographic characteristics of the middle class could be described more representatively and extensively by quantitative data. The patterns of
consumption among Chinese people could also be illustrated in a graphic way and associated with socio-economic indicators efficiently using quantitative models. The China General Social Survey 2003, which is secondary data and contains variables on demographic features and consumption practices, is able to complete the two tasks and save labour for data collection. There are, however, limited variables on participation in consumption practices in the survey data, which are insufficient to reveal the complexity of consumer life among the middle class. Furthermore, analysis of the survey data has difficulty in obtaining subjective interpretations, subtle variations between individuals, as well as how consumption practices are shaped by specific contexts. The latter three tasks could only be achieved by qualitative data.

It can be seen that the mixed methods design employed by this thesis is mainly to enhance the interpretations and further explore the arguments using qualitative methods. The quantitative data will provide background information and generate preliminary arguments, while the qualitative data is the primary source for rich and profound information and will generate the main arguments. This strategy, where the qualitative component has priority, has been used by a majority of social researchers, according to the examination of a sample of the current mixed methods studies by Brannen (2008: 57). It is also described as ‘mixed methods with qualitative orientation’ by Mason (2006: 3). This strategy is helpful in shedding light on the research object from a bigger set of observations. Being governed by qualitative methodological logic, this strategy entails little risk of ‘ontological chasm’ between quantitative and qualitative methods, and evades the challenge of working out a mixed methods explanation (ibid.). Therefore, the philosophical trap in mixed methods, as discussed above, is less of a threat to this thesis.

In the field of Chinese consumer studies, however, mixed methods are not commonly applied. In English-language literature, interest is mostly derived from disciplines of business, sociology and anthropology. Business and market research on Chinese consumers, which are quite numerous, prefer quantitative methods, including questionnaire methods in the study of consumer psychology (e.g. Chang, 2006; Tam, 2005; Yao and Wang, 2000) and surveys (e.g. Chow et al., 2001; Shen, 2002; McEwen, 2006; Zhou, 2003; Fan and Xiao, 1998). Sociologists and anthropologists studying Chinese consumer culture, by contrast, often use qualitative methods (e.g. Davis, 2005; Hsu, 2005; Ngai, 2003; Fan, 2000), probably because of the difficulty of collecting survey data in China. Chinese sociologists, in an advantageous position for data collection, are keen on survey methods, a
majority of which focus on consumption practices in the middle class (Liu, 2007; Xu and Zhao, 2002; Zhang, 2005; Horizon, 2006). Only a few studies of consumption patterns in Chinese language (e.g. Zheng, 2006; Zhou, 2005) conduct mixed methods research.

This dissertation, using mixed methods, can reveal and explain the consumption patterns in contemporary China from separate perspectives, which could enhance the reliability of the arguments. The qualitative data is generated from 30 semi-structured interviews, which were conducted by the author in 2008. The method of interview is superior in comprehending ‘real life’ and obtaining rich and holist data in a specific context, so it is particularly good for understanding latent and underlying issues (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In fact, in the field of cultural capital and consumer culture studies, the combination of multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) of a survey alongside textual analysis of qualitative interviews has been embraced since Bourdieu (1984) and remains popular in contemporary literature (e.g. Silva and Wright, 2008; Bennett et al., 2009). According to the above methodological concerns and the existing paradigm in the study of consumer culture, this dissertation integrates the two methods by applying MCA to the survey data and qualitative analysis to the interview data. My networks in Beijing and skills in mixed methods, on the other hand, make the combination of the two methods feasible.

In practice, the quantitative analysis was conducted before the interviews, so the two methods will be elaborated in this sequence. This chapter focuses on the evaluation of the two data sources and their methods of analysis.

Source of the quantitative data

The source of quantitative data is the ‘China General Social Survey 2003’ (CGSS 2003). The unit of survey is individual, and the respondents are aged between 18 and 69 (CGSS, 2003a). This survey aims at measuring the changing relationship between social structure and quality of life in China (CGSS, 2003b). In this survey, information includes demographic characteristics of respondents and households, social network, educational attainment, career history and process of obtaining current job, origins and destinations of each migration, identity, consumption practices and opinions on social inequality and other public-concerned topics (CGSS, 2003d; CGSS, 2003e). Since the quantitative analysis attempts to outline the characteristics of the middle class as well as their consumption patterns, the variables that interest this dissertation are demographic features, career history,
migration, and participation in consumption practices.

Sampling design and sample information

Overall, this survey combines five-stage stratification sampling with Probabilities Proportional to Size (PPS) cluster sampling. The primary sampling units (PSUs) are city districts and counties selected from mainland China composed of 22 provinces, 4 autonomous regions and 4 central municipalities\(^1\) (CGSS, 2003a:1). All PSUs are stratified into five strata: (1) city districts of the **three central municipalities**, including a total of 44 city districts in Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin\(^2\); (2) city districts of **provincial capital cities**, including a total of 175 city districts in 26 provincial capital cities and Chongqing, with sub-strata of eastern region\(^3\), central region\(^4\) and western region\(^5\); (3) the **eastern region**, including a total of 611 city districts and counties in the three central municipalities and 6 provinces, other than the urban districts of Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and six provincial capital cities; (4) the **central region**, including a total of 1,136 city districts and counties in 11 provinces, other than urban districts of the 11 provincial capital cities; (5) the **western region**, including a total of 835 city districts and counties in 10 provinces, other than urban districts of the 10 provincial capital cities (CGSS, 2003a: 1-3). According to the sampling frame and the sampling strata, the survey is representative of the areas in which it was applied.

In the selection of the units for each stage, PPS strategy is applied. The schemes of the distribution of units could be described as below. At the first stage, 15 PSUs are selected from a total of 44 city districts in the first stratum, 5 in each municipality. Sixteen PSUs are selected from a total of 175 city districts in the second stratum, and the allocation of units depends on the urban population in each sub-stratum. A total of 94 PSUs are sampled from the third, the fourth and the fifth stratum, with 30 units allocated to the eastern region, 42 units to the central region and 22 units to the western region according to population size.

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1 Tibet, a provincial level unit, is excluded from the sampling frame in consideration of feasibility of survey implementation (CGSS 2003a: 1)
2 There are four central municipalities in China, which are Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing. Chongqing, however, has been excluded from this stratum due to its lag in social-economic development in comparison with the other three, see more in CGSS, 2003a, p.1-2
3 Eastern region includes Liaoning, Shandong, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Fujian and Guangdong (CGSS, 2003a)
4 Central region includes Heilongjiang, Jilin, Hebei, Henan, Shanxi, Anhui, Jiangxi, Hubei, Hunan, Hainan and Guangxi (CGSS, 2003a)
5 Western region includes Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai, Yunnan, Guizhou, Shaanxi, Sichuan and Chongqing (CGSS, 2003a).
In the survey design, the total numbers of urban and rural household samples will be determined by an urban-rural ratio of 6000: 4000\(^1\). At the second stage, 4 city sub-districts or townships are selected from each PSU. In the first and the second stratum, 4 city sub-districts are selected from each PSU, and the corresponding ultimate sampling units are urban samples. To allow for comparisons between rural and urban areas, each of the third, the fourth and the fifth stratum are stratified into five sub-strata according to the percentage of urban population, and SSUs in the three strata are allocated following different schemes (CGSS, 2003a: 5).

At the third stage, 2 neighbourhood committees or villagers’ committees are chosen from each Secondary Sampling Unit (SSU). 10 households are selected from each Third Sampling Unit (TSU), and at the last stage, one person is selected from each sampled household using Kish method (CGSS, 2003a: 3-4). Table 5.1 illustrates the distribution of samples in the sampling design.

Table 5.1 Designed distribution of samples in the CGSS 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stratum</th>
<th>PSU City district (rural county)</th>
<th>SSU City sub-district (township, town seat)</th>
<th>TSU Neighborhood committee (villagers’ committee)</th>
<th>USU Household (household member)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The 1st stratum</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5×4=20</td>
<td>20×2=40</td>
<td>40×10=400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tianjin</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5×4=20</td>
<td>20×2=40</td>
<td>40×10=400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5×4=20</td>
<td>20×2=40</td>
<td>40×10=400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 2nd stratum</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>1,280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5×4=20</td>
<td>20×2=40</td>
<td>40×10=400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6×4=24</td>
<td>24×2=48</td>
<td>48×10=480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5×4=20</td>
<td>20×2=40</td>
<td>40×10=400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 3rd stratum</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30×4=120</td>
<td>120×2=240</td>
<td>240×10=2,320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 4th stratum</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42×4=168</td>
<td>168×2=336</td>
<td>336×10=3,360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 5th stratum</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22×4=88</td>
<td>88×2=176</td>
<td>176×10=1,762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>125</strong></td>
<td><strong>500</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,000</strong></td>
<td><strong>10,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In terms of sampling method, the simple random sampling principle is applied to each stage before the stage of selecting households. The sampling of households within neighbourhood committee or villagers’ committee employs the method of ‘equal interval sampling’, because the difference in household size is rather insignificant (CGSS, 2003a: 3-4).

\(^1\) According to a CGSS 2003 researcher, the CGSS surveys seek to ‘oversample’ urban areas, as they assume urban areas are more diversified than rural areas.
7). ‘Equal interval sampling’ is an equal probability systematic sampling method with a random start, by visiting every nth household within each neighbourhood committee. Kish Grid sampling is deployed at the final stage to ensure that one respondent is randomly selected from each household (ibid.).

Overall, the sampling design results in a total of 125 PSUs plus 500 SSUs with urban-rural ratio of 295:205, and 1,000 TSUs with urban-rural ratio of 590: 410. The household ratio between urban and rural areas will therefore be 5900:4100 (ibid: 8).

However, because of limited available funds, CGSS 2003 covers urban areas only (CGSS, 2003b), so it is essentially an urban-representative survey. Because of the increasing migration in contemporary China, there are, however, a small percentage of rural respondents (people with rural household registration) in this survey.

As described in the survey implementation document (CGSS, 2003c), the total valid sample size is 5,894 households, with an overall response rate of 77%. In order to generalise the estimations more accurately, it is necessary to weight the samples. There are three weights available in the data: (1) the weight of inverse of the probability of households sampling; (2) the weight of inverse of the probability of individual sampling; (3) the combined weight using gender and age based on statistics of the fifth census in 2000 (CGSS, 2003a: 13-16). The combined weight is used, as this dissertation is concerned with the demographic characteristics of the metropolitan population.

**Methods of analysis**

The methods employed to analyze the quantitative data include frequency analysis, cross-tabulation and multiple correspondence analysis (MCA). Examining the frequencies and cross-tabulations of nominal variables shows the percentages of the middle class and their characteristics with regard to age, gender, occupation, income, industry and areas of residence. The method of MCA, on the other hand, helps to map the proximity and distance of participation in consumption practices among socio-economic groups. MCA will be explained more fully below.

When modelling participation in consumption practices, the mode of analysis of the quantitative data is confirmatory analysis, as opposed to the strategy of exploratory
Confirmatory analysis allows researchers to hypothesize a particular model or factor structure that they believe underlies the variables measured in the study, and then confirm or validate the quality of the fit between the model and the data (Meyers et al, 2006). It is more of a deductive method than exploratory analysis. Whilst it takes more time and is less effective for exploring dependent variables in a huge statistical database like CGSS 2003, a deductive method is more useful and efficient to build up relationships between variables based on existing literature. As reviewed in chapter 4, consumption patterns in China are mainly associated with age, social class, income and area of residence, so it is possible to postulate a model of consumption patterns to be confirmed. One of the challenges, however, is the selection of method of analysis. I have tried two commonly used data reduction methods: factor analysis (FA) and principal component analysis (PCA). Unfortunately, the distribution of the variables measuring participation in consumption practices is significantly skewed, while FA and PCA would expect normal distributions of the factor/component variables (Tobachnick and Fidell, 2007). In consequence, this dissertation turns to multiple correspondence analysis for the quantitative data. Correspondence analysis can be seen as an adaptation to categorical data of PCA, where the geometric definition of PCA rather than its statistical one is considered (Blasius and Greenacre, 2006: 12; Greenacre, 2006a: 42). MCA, as a nonlinear multivariate analysis method, visually displays the association between more than two categorical variables (Greenacre, 2006a: 41-42). Hence, in MCA there is no multivariate normality as an assumption forced in PCA.

Besides the tolerance of non-normality, MCA has two further features which make it stand out among multidimensional scaling methods. Firstly, the visual impact of the findings is easy to interpret. For one thing, the distance between two categories enables researchers to infer the proximity of individuals of given types, for instance, middle aged and female might lie close together in a diagram. Also, the contribution of each category to each axis allows researchers to interpret the patterns revealed by the data. Secondly, after the maps of consumption patterns are constructed, supplementary variables can also be added to associate the patterns with demographic categories, without changing the coordinates of the original maps. These two features of MCA are embedded in most MCA software (plotting individual cases, plotting the main categories, and plotting the supplementary variables as ordinal or nominal categories). Continuous variables cannot be plotted onto the resulting graph unless they are broken into ordinal groups. Seeing a plot of ‘the cloud of individuals’ is helpful to assess what kinds of individuals tend to share the same
consumption pattern. If qualitative interviewees are selected from the quantitative survey, this cloud is also able to position where the interviewee is located on the map. Limited by the analysis software and the data source, however, the present research project cannot graph the cloud of individuals or locate the interviewees on the map. Besides, the dataset is a huge random sample survey, whereas MCA methods were developed mainly for smaller, non-random samples. Nevertheless, due to the advantages listed, MCA has been broadly applied in market research and cultural capital studies (see Hoffman and Leeuw, 1992; Gayo-Cal et al., 2006; Bennett et al., 2009). In the context of the present mixed methods research, MCA has been used as a method of summarising the statistical data, and then the qualitative methods have been used separately. The application and findings of MCA will be discussed in chapter 6.

**Evaluation of the quantitative data**

**Strengths**

This data source contains a large sample. The survey was conducted in 2003, so the findings could be generalised to contemporary China to some extent, which makes it possible to combine with interview findings to arrive at a more reliable conclusion. Although the survey is only urban-representative, this does not cause many problems to this dissertation, since it too focuses on urban areas.

There are variables on migration, occupation, and consumption practices, as well as stratified regions. The variables enable me to estimate the percentage of the middle class in the metropolitan cities and to describe demographic features of the middle class and their consumption patterns. Another advantage of these data is the availability of different types of weight variables, which saves time and labour in calculating weights. With weight variables, the estimations would more closely reflect the actual situation of the country.

**Weaknesses**

The main weakness lies in the small sample size of metropolitan population, i.e. people living in the city districts of Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin. Although the entire sample size is large, the observations are few as to the population residing in the metropolitan cities.
The metropolitan sample is even smaller if collapsed by occupation and income. Therefore, the reliability of the estimates could be compromised.

Another weakness is insufficient information on consumption and household registration, which makes it difficult to construct relevant measurements. The data contains only a few variables on consumption practices, so I have selected only six of them for analysis. Besides, the population of ‘metropolitan natives’ can only be estimated by a proximate measurement, although by reference to other migration information. The details on the construction of measurement will be addressed in chapter 6.

Throughout critical evaluation of the data source, CGSS 2003 is still found to be competent. While there are not many datasets about China available to the author, this survey provides background information valuable to the research concerns. The next section will be concerned with the source of qualitative data and its methods of analysis.

**Source of the qualitative data**

The method for collecting qualitative data is semi-structured interviews. I conducted 29 interviews with members of the middle class in Beijing during 2008, plus one pilot interview in 2007. The concerns of the interviews are sociological, including shopping habits, disposition towards material goods, preferences, material aspirations, anxieties and dilemmas, social interactions and metropolitan effects. The qualitative data source will be introduced with regard to interview design, pilot interview, sample selection, and conducting interviews. Transcription of the interviews and method of analysis will be referred to thereafter. Finally, the qualitative data source will be critically evaluated.

**Interview design and ethics**

The qualitative analysis aims at understanding the nature and extent of consumption patterns among the middle class and their interpretations. The method of semi-structured interviews allows researchers to direct the conversation and also makes it possible for aspects neglected by researchers or embedded in everyday practices to emerge. It is more flexible than structured interviews and surveys, and also less time-consuming than participation observation.
Based on the research concerns, the interview questions focus on the three main dimensions of consumption; namely everyday consumption, taste, and material culture. The structure of the interview questions is:

(1) everyday consumption in relation to practices and social conventions, including shopping frequency, shopping locations, expenditure categories and management of expenditure, household shopping, family commitments, giving gifts, social interactions in consumption and generational differences;

(2) taste, i.e. preferences in consumer goods and activities, concerning how taste is distributed within the middle class, how they make judgement of taste on the basis of their own tastes, and how they justify their tastes;

(3) material culture, with regard to disposition of material goods, the nature and the extent of material aspirations, and strategies to keep balance between material aspirations and income;

(4) transitions of consumption and metropolitan effects, concerned with how consumption changes over a lifetime and the extent to which living in Beijing impacts on consumption practices;

(5) anxieties and dilemmas, focusing on anxieties, ambivalence and pressure in consumption and consumer strategies;

(6) finally, demographic characteristics as background information, including occupation, housing, family, migration, age, and income.

It can be seen that, in addition to the main dimensions of consumption, transitions of consumption and anxieties were also investigated in the interviews. In one’s life, consumption would undergo changes of shopping habits, expenditure, taste and material aspirations, which are reflections of social mobility, individual orientations as well as social changes. In particular, this dissertation is concerned with how consumption is shaped by the experience of living in a metropolitan city. The questions on anxieties and dilemmas are more reflective. According to the pilot interview, the middle class tend to be optimistic and positive during the conversation. So these questions were added later on to let interviewees recall any negative aspects or ambivalence in consumption. Another question that was added during fieldwork is about influences of the ‘credit crunch’, which affected China in 2008. However, questions on how consumption functions as a field of exercising citizenship were not specially enquired, as this research does not particularly focus on this issue. But this dissertation would be open to discussion if interviewees talk
about it.

Having outlined the interview structure, one of the challenges, however, is operationalisation. I have to cover these topics during interviews and at the same time advance the conversation in a pleasant way. Two main strategies are introduced here. One is to progress in interviews from everyday habits to reflective discussion, and another strategy is to focus on detailed stories rather than general conclusions. The purpose of the first strategy is to lead the conversation step by step, during which process the respondents would feel at ease. The reason for the second strategy is that several interviewees keep referring to the viewpoints and practices which are widely-accepted by society, such as ‘luxury consumption in this society is too much’, ‘I don’t have strong material aspiration’, ‘I don’t buy very expensive goods’; or start with ‘for example a watch’ or ‘for example a person’. These data are informative but pointless if without specific context. This is actually a common problem when encountering well-educated informants in ethnography. As argued by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), it is the very structure of the interaction in interviews that forces participants to be aware of the ethnographer as audience. Nevertheless, the highly conceptual or theoretical answers, usually given by well-educated or ‘sophisticated’ informants, are in danger of eroding the database by moving away from description into analysis (ibid.). Thus, during interviews, I have encouraged interviewees to tell me as many details of each story as possible, no matter how discursive or trivial they are. As a result, I am able to reflect the findings and construct arguments with sufficient information, which has greatly enhanced the reliability of the interview data.

In addition to the above two strategies, I also reserved the questions on income till the end of interviews, and respondents could choose to answer it or not. The reason is simple: people are more likely to give more private information to the researcher after establishing trust during an interview. This strategy has helped me to obtain the amount of income from as many as 90% of the interviewees, although the authenticity of the data is doubtful in some cases. As for the few who keep their income secret, their income could still be inferred from ownership of consumer goods and general expenditure.

Before leaving for fieldwork, I also reflected on the ethical issues that might be involved in the interviews. The confidentiality and anonymity of the interview data are a major concern. Although the interviews are audio-recorded for the convenience of transcription, the records will be kept confidential and will be assessed only by me. I will not leak any
information to the acquaintances of the interviewees, or expose their personal data with real names. Thus, all the interviewee’s names in my dissertation are fake names in order to ensure anonymity of the data. The ethics of confidentiality and anonymity of the data are under the surveillance of the Ethics Committee of the University of Manchester, and are also explained to the interviewees before each interview. Informed consent proves helpful in data collection, in terms of gaining trust from interviewees. Another ethical issue is the anxiety or embarrassment that certain interview questions could possibly invoke. It is, however, clarified before each interview that the interviewees can refuse to answer or stop talking about any questions if they feel uncomfortable. For instance, the interviewees can choose to tell me their income or not, and can simply stop reflecting the trajectory of their material aspirations if encountering any unpleasant memories. To deal with the latter situation, there is a strategy that I never ask these questions directly, but refer to them at suitable moments or let the subject mention it spontaneously.

**Pilot interview, sampling strategy and fieldwork**

In order to test the validity and feasibility of the interview questions, a pilot interview was conducted in the summer of 2007 in Beijing. The interviewee is a consultant in a leading multinational company, female, 27, and came to Beijing to attend university at the age of 18. The conversation went very well and showed that shopping and consumption is a pleasant topic. The fact that she seemed over-positive made me decide to complement my interviews with questions about anxieties and dilemmas in consumption. The pilot interview took a long time, nearly three hours, which suggested reducing the number of questions and controlling the tempo of conversation. This interview was fully transcribed and inputted into Nvivo, to be analyzed with the other interviews.

I began to do formal interviews from January 2008. Referring to existing studies on the middle class, I selected sample of middle class subjects based on occupations, i.e. business-owners, managers and professionals, and civil servants, and also considered job ranks and the scale of employer. The majority of the interviewees were the contacts of my friends and acquaintances. I had never met most of them before and they did not know each other, except three pairs of interviewees who were introduced by each other or both were contacts of one of my friends. During the selection of samples, I paid attention to two issues: (1) avoiding people whom I am familiar with, for example my friends, in which case bias might be caused by affinity and homogeneity with me; (2) heterogeneity of
demographic characteristics among the interviewees, with regard to age, gender, occupation, industry, origin of hometown, education, income, and so on. After the first 25 interviews, substantial useful information was obtained to answer my research questions. In order to expand knowledge of the consumption patterns and supplement the information, 4 more interviews were conducted, focusing on judgement and justification of taste, metropolitan effects and strategies to deal with anxieties in consumption. As a result, the interview data were collected from a total of 29 respondents in two stages of formal interviews.

When the contact details of a candidate are provided, the procedure for one interview could be described as below. I call or email him/her, clarifying the purpose of the interview, the policy of confidentiality and anonymity, and the interview structure if required, and then making a convenient appointment. It turns out that most of the interviews were conducted at their workplace or nearby, such as in a café, meeting room or their own office; only two female interviewees invited me to their home, one of whom was pregnant so preferred being interviewed at home. It could be inferred that the workplace is a very important space for the middle class to organise their life, especially when dealing with non-kinship social relations. Among all the 10 interviews taking place at cafés, only 3 bills were paid by me, in cases when the interviewees were the same age as me. All the other older informants insist that they should pay the bill. It could be inferred from this that the factors of gender, age and social class play important roles in consumption practices among the middle class. In other words, the traditional mode of men, older and better-off people paying for female, younger and lower-income people as a favour is still working in contemporary society, since they know I am a university student. Another possible reason is that middle class members are affluent enough to ignore such a small expenditure.

Although I was introduced to the candidates before they were contacted, there were still a percentage of refusals. My interview request was rejected by a total of six contacts during the fieldwork. Two middle-ranked civil servants in their 40s, use the excuses that ‘I’m quite busy at the moment and I’ll contact you later’ - no further notice thereafter, and ‘I have no idea about this topic, so can’t say anything’. From my experience, they might have been worried about the confidentiality of the interview or that their earnings could be detected from consumption. My promises of confidentiality and anonymity of the data could not convince them. Besides the two civil servants, my request was also declined by a senior manager in a state-owned bank, who preferred a group interview to one-to-one
conversation. The possible reason, from my understanding, is that she was reluctant to refer to personal information. That is why there are not many samples except Hans with the occupations from state-owned institutions, e.g. higher-ranked civil servants and managers of state-owned enterprises. One IT professional was happy to be interviewed but refused to be voice-recorded, which I had to give up eventually. Actually, the rejection of voice-recording has happened before in my sociological research career. It is implied that Chinese people have not entirely recovered from the horrifying memories of the Cultural Revolution in Mao’s time, when an innocent person could be jailed because of any random evidence, a piece of writing or an episode of voice-record. It is gratifying, however, that none of the respondents who agreed to be interviewed refuse voice-recording. The third case of unsuccessful contact was a request for payment. Since other subjects with similar characteristics were available, this candidate abstained. To be fair, some of the refusals are understandable. Besides the historical experiences mentioned above, the reputation of researchers has been undermined by several negative cases, for instance, leakage of respondents’ information or profitable marketing research being conducted in the name of social research.

Nevertheless, as to the 30 completed interviews, including the pilot interview, the interviewees are described in table 5.2. Not all of the interviewees gave their age or the amount of income, which are not mandatory in the interviews, so some ages and incomes listed in table 5.2 are extrapolated from information available.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Migrant/Native</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Work institution</th>
<th>Annual income (yuan)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Civil servant</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Central government</td>
<td>54,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carey</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Business-owner</td>
<td>Financial investment</td>
<td>Private company</td>
<td>Above 1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>State-level referee, middle-ranked civil servant</td>
<td>Government /sports</td>
<td>Provincial government agency</td>
<td>120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Business and administration manager</td>
<td>Stocks</td>
<td>Foreign Company</td>
<td>60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flora</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>Consulting</td>
<td>Multinational company</td>
<td>190,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Product executive</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Private company</td>
<td>300,000-400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Senior manager/head of design centre</td>
<td>Electronic products and cars</td>
<td>Private-holding company</td>
<td>600,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grey</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Sales manager</td>
<td>Luxury watches</td>
<td>Multinational Company</td>
<td>150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hans</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Senior director</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td>State-owned news agency</td>
<td>150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazel</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Associate professor</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>CPO (Chief Procurement Officer)</td>
<td>Chemical industry</td>
<td>American company</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyce</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Assistant manager</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Private-holding company</td>
<td>300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Human resource</td>
<td>Property</td>
<td>Foreign Company</td>
<td>70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Current Position</td>
<td>Industry/Company Details</td>
<td>Salary Range</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>---------------------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Department director</td>
<td>Media Sate-owned news agency</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Civil servant</td>
<td>Government District-level government</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Sales manager</td>
<td>Hotel Private-holding company</td>
<td>70,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Assistant manager client implementation</td>
<td>Bank Multinational company</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Research and design manager</td>
<td>Electronic products Foreign company</td>
<td>480,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olive</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Public relation executive</td>
<td>Food State-holding company</td>
<td>300,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Team leader of advertising department</td>
<td>IT Multinational company</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Business-owner</td>
<td>Art Private company Above 1,000,000</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Department manager</td>
<td>Real-estate Private-holding company</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Business and administration manager</td>
<td>Real-estate consulting Foreign company</td>
<td>120,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>CBA (Chief Business Administrator)</td>
<td>Real-estate media Private-owned company</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>Accounting University</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Director (retired)</td>
<td>Research State-owned research institute</td>
<td>50,000-60,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wing</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>Hospital State-owned hospital</td>
<td>50,000-60,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvonne</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>Law Private firm</td>
<td>60,000</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Sector</td>
<td>Employer Type</td>
<td>Salary</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zack</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>General manager</td>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>State-holding company</td>
<td>300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoë</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Writer and researcher</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>State-owned research institute</td>
<td>60,000 (+publication fees)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
By migrant, I mean people moving to Beijing from within China; by native, I mean people who were born in Beijing. It can be seen that the interviewees are aged between 27 and 60, 11 of them are natives, 15 of them are male, and they work in various industries and institutions. The distribution of income of the interviewees by age and gender can be visualised from figure 5.1. It is shown that most of them are aged at 26 to 30 and 31 to 40, and the interviewees are clustered at an annual income between 50,000yuan and 200,000yuan. The gender difference in income is salient. More women are distributed at the bottom of the pyramid between 50,000yuan and 200,000yuan a year, while more men are positioned above the income of 200,000yuan a year. With the annual income below 200,000yuan, the interviewees are mostly aged below 30 or above 50, working as civil servants, doctor in state-owned hospital, lecturers or researchers, or professionals in companies early in their career. At the top of the income pyramid, which is 1 million yuan a year and above, the respondents are two business-owners in financial investment and art products\(^1\), and two senior managers in a large-scale foreign company and a middle-scale media company.

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\(^1\) Phillip, the business-owner, began to do art in 2007 and did not earn much money. Before that, he was doing real-estate and earned millions of yuan a year. The income here considers the savings and his current earnings.
Figure 5.1 Income distribution of the interviewees by age and gender

Key--Age
- 26-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51+

Male

Female

¥50,000

¥100,000

¥200,000

¥300,000

¥400,000

¥500,000

¥600,000

¥700,000

¥800,000

¥900,000

¥1,000,000
Methods of analysis

During fieldwork, notes were made on each interview as soon as it was done. The notes documented things that interested me, including key responses, body language, and other details relevant to personality and orientations. These notes were very helpful in the analysis of the data. They brought me back to the scene efficiently and outlined key points of each interview in highly condensed words. Therefore, the notes were an important source for ‘plausibility’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 246-247), which could lead to a quick jump to a conclusion, so it needed to be systematized in later analysis. The intuitive arguments facilitated coding, correlating and explaining the data at later stages.

After the first three interviews during my fieldwork, I transcribed and translated each completely and inputted the text into Nvivo 7.0, which is the software I use to analyze the qualitative data. The three examples enabled me to evaluate the interview questions and the conduct of interviews. For the other 26 interviews, a ‘revolutionary’ method of transcription was adopted. Treating each audio record as a document, I indexed them with time scales and summarised each slice of recording (basically every 30 seconds), and transcribed and translated the audio slices only when needed. These texts were also inputted into Nvivo. This method saved considerable time and energy, and omitted frivolous details as shown in full transcription, since the data could be presented as summaries. Furthermore, these indexes and summaries allowed coding and analyzing as full transcription did. The details of analysis will be illustrated later. With guidance of the time scales in the transcription, I was able to retrieve any information from the audio files in a short time and transcribe them selectively. This alternative to traditional full transcription, however, entailed a risk of overlooking relevant material, ‘especially since what will be judged relevant changes over time’ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 149). My strategy was to transcribe as much as I could at the first and second stages of analysis (see details below) and refer to the audio records when I wanted to adjust the analysis. It is not as complicated as it sounds, and in fact it is more enjoyable to listen and think than to read on screen. After transcription, the subsequent analysis is basically completed through four stages: data coding, linking of codes, constructing arguments, and validating arguments.

The first stage of analysis was data coding and retrieval, which was assisted by Nvivo. Codes were created according to the research concerns, including everyday consumption, taste, material culture, metropolitan effects and anxieties. However, the codes were more
discursive at this stage. Most of them are cross-sectional categories and the data were basically indexed by ‘literal’ categories and ‘interpretive’ categories (Mason, 2002: 149). Literal categories refer to the words and language used, the sequence of interaction, the form and structure of the dialogue, and the literal content (ibid.). This type of codes are, for example, ‘preferences’, part of ‘justifications’, ‘confusion and anxieties’ ‘metropolitan effects’ and all the demographic codes. The interpretive indexes, however, place emphasis on the accounts by the researcher, which are concerned with constructing a version of ‘what you think the data mean or represent, or what you think you can infer from them’ (ibid.). This type of codes are the most, for instance, ‘strategy to balance material aspirations with purchasing power’, ‘social values’, ‘taste understanding’, part of ‘justifications’, part of ‘material aspirations’ and part of ‘comparison with parents’. As a result, a total of 61 free nodes (codes) were set up. I also considered the role that I had played in the interviews. For instance, would the interviewee refer to other preferences on consumption without my presence, or did the interviewee want to establish certain a certain image when interpreting his/her behaviour?

Having worked out the free codes, I proceeded to deal with the relations between them. At first, each code was subsumed into the relevant themes, and a scheme of 15 tree codes with three-levels was thus established. It needs noting that some of the free codes were assigned to more than one tree code, and some of the transcription/summary texts were assigned to more than one free code. This is one of the distinguishing features of qualitative analysis where the coding scheme is not necessarily exclusive (Mason, 2002). During classifying free codes and linking free codes to each other, mainly interpretive logic is used, for instance, when associating the ‘justifications’ of taste with ‘age’ and ‘income’ and including ‘social interactions’, ‘family obligations’, ‘differences between parents and children’ and ‘gender roles in household shopping’ in the tree code of ‘social conventions’.

On the one hand, the literal analysis generated information on consumption patterns and the social context. On the other hand, the interpretive and reflexive logic of analysis, relating objective observations to social context when constructing arguments and concerning and the role of ‘audience’, could overcome the limitation of literal analysis in which research findings rely on authenticity of data. During the process of coding and correlating data, some of the codes were adjusted as to its content or definition, which was handled efficiently by Nvivo. Meanwhile, a large amount of ‘annotations’ were saved in the software, containing transcripts of the audio episodes that are crucial to the analysis as
well as some notes.

It needs noting that the cross-sectional coding cannot be seen as a quantitative logic of variable analysis. As Mason (2002: 157) suggested, it is unlikely to achieve a high degree of uniformity between each section of the qualitative data, and the complex processes cannot be reduced to a static or simple variable, so the form of coding and method of analysis applied could be varied across the data. Therefore, besides different logic of coding and interpretation, I combined cross-sectional analysis with contextual and case study. This clarification is important to the way in which I constructed the arguments.

The type of arguments desired by this dissertation, according to Mason’s classification (2002), is about how something has developed and about how something works or is constituted. In consequence, I will demonstrate the features and evolution of the consumption practices of the middle class, interpret the patterns of consumption through consumer orientation, and illustrate how the new elements in consumer orientation are tempered by social conventions and social context. The chapters on the qualitative analysis will explain how the arguments are linked to the data and how the interpretations are constructed.

In order to test the validity of the arguments, I firstly checked their applicability to all the data by looking for the ‘outliers’. When it is argued that the orientation to personal pleasure is significant among the middle class, ‘Wing’ is a case who is relatively frugal in the young generation and ‘Hazel’ is a case for whom comfort is more important. Through comparing the two cases with the others, I found Wing earns a lower income than the other interviewees at the same age, and Hazel is older than the interviewees pursuing pleasure and is in charge of household shopping. The analysis highlighted the roles that age, income and gender play in differentiating consumer orientations. Therefore, the ‘outliers’ can also be interpreted by my arguments, and analysis of the ‘outliers’ has strengthened the conclusion.

Another strategy of validating the arguments is getting feedback from my friends, who are also middle class participants of the consumer culture in China. At first, their discussion focused on complaints about busy and ‘boring’ life as well as the struggles with low disposable income. The feedback had firstly frustrated me and made me wonder whether the pursuit of pleasure is really ‘significant’ among the middle class. However, I soon
realised this is actually good evidence for my conclusion. Only when the middle class desire material goods which bring pleasure and comfort can they feel the tension caused by low purchasing power. Just because everyday life is thought to be pressured and repetitive, people are more enthusiastic about the pursuit of pleasure, which is tempered with the pursuit of comfort, compared with the dimension of status-displaying. That is why, when I continued to ask about how they organised everyday life, it turned out that my middle class friends, resembling the interviewees in my data, take tourism (travelling, hiking and camping) as their priority for holidays.

Generalisation of the conclusion in this dissertation is achieved through theoretical generalisation, which is thought to be more productive than empirical generalisation in qualitative analysis (Mason, 2002; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). First of all, the sampling strategy clearly shows that the interviewees were selected from a wider population so there is no reason to suspect atypicality of the data. Secondly, the conclusion specified the differentiations and the context of how the consumer orientation operates in China. The validation of the methodology as well as the arguments suggests that the arguments could also be used to explain consumption patterns in other settings. The applicability of theoretical generalisations to other settings is certainly limited by the extent of their similarity to the setting defined by this dissertation. The details of the setting will be explained further in the empirical chapters.

*Evaluation of the qualitative data*

The quality of the data has been greatly enhanced by the kind cooperation of the interviewees. They were not only very patient with the data collection, but most of them generously told me as much as they knew. One reason is that they found the topic of shopping and consumption enjoyable, as mentioned before. Another reason, according to several interviewees, is that my dissertation could generate helpful implications for the society and hence they are happy to make their contributions. Besides, people living in Beijing have a reputation for being blunt and outgoing, compared with people living in Shanghai who tend to be more cautious. That is why the trust between the interviewee and I was easily built, which was quite different from my previous experiences of doing interviews in Shanghai.

Nevertheless, the responses from the interviewees need more sociological reflection. For
example, as to the claim of expensive gifts only going to closer relations, it is worth considering the context of such a discourse. Another example is the judgement that well-known designer goods with big logos are in bad taste, and I wonder to what extent these interviewees reject conspicuous consumption in practice. There are four factors that might have impact on the responses from the interviewees. One is ‘image management’, the effort that people make to establish a certain image consciously or subconsciously, which, together with ‘sophisticated’ informants as mentioned above who are good at theorizing phenomena, is common in ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). The third factor comes from the impression of me, a lady in her 20s doing a PhD in England, which might encourage the interviewees to talk about fashion, shopping and luxury goods in a positive way and avoid the memories and facts that make them feel inferior or look miserable. This is the effect of the researcher being ‘audience’, and thus the data should also be interpreted reflexively. The fourth factor is self-protection: preventing me from acquiring personal information in the interests of privacy. In this case, misleading data on income, personality or family background might be obtained. These problems were recognized during fieldwork, and various strategies were adopted to enhance the ‘authenticity’ of the data. I tried to be professional when talking with each interviewee, by convincing them of the confidentiality in use of their data and showing my understanding of various emotions and experiences.

Conclusion

This chapter has formulated the methodology of this dissertation. It is empirical research using mixed methods. The quantitative data comes from a national survey in 2003, and the qualitative data comes from the 30 interviews conducted in Beijing. A critical evaluation of the two data sources indicates reliable quality. It is shown how arguments are constructed from interview data and these will be advanced in chapters 7-9. The process of how arguments are constructed from the survey data will be described in chapter 6. From chapter 6, this dissertation will proceed with the empirical findings drawn from the two types of data.
Chapter 6 Characteristics of the middle class and their consumption patterns

Introduction

This chapter focuses on findings from the survey data ‘China General Social Survey 2003’ (CGSS 2003). As discussed in chapter 5, this data source is urban-representative with a large sample size, and contains variables on social class, migration and consumption practices. Findings from the quantitative data will frame the background of this dissertation, in terms of characteristics of the middle class and their participation in consumption practices. In this chapter, the middle class is defined by occupation and this dissertation is concerned with the middle class in the metropolitan cities. According to the literature review, the rise of the middle class in contemporary China is closely associated with the growth of the service sector, especially the new service sector, and the consumption patterns are chiefly differentiated by age, income, social class and area of residence. This chapter will therefore reveal the characteristics of the middle class with regard to occupation, area of residence, age, gender, income and industry. In order to facilitate the analysis, relevant variables need to be created in the first place. Arguments on the consumption patterns from the quantitative data are preliminary, compared with the more in-depth articulation in the qualitative analysis. They are, however, helpful to making an outline of the features of the middle class and generating useful implications for the qualitative analysis.

Measurements of key variables

Occupation and middle class

In the survey analysis, social class is operationalised as occupational class. Although social class might also be associated with rank of occupation and scale of employer, occupation contains the most useful information for social distinction. Besides, some of the occupation categories in the survey also indicate job ranks. For convenience, the quantitative analysis measures social class by occupation. The variables on occupation in the survey data are from a set of time-series variables, which collects employment information in historical sequence from the first job to the current one, twelve jobs at most (CGSS, 2003d: 16). The codes of occupation follow Occupation Classification and Codes 2000 (CGSS, 2003d),
which lists explicitly up to 999 occupations including employment, self-employment and unemployment. Based on this information, the current occupation of respondents is identified by the last occupation variable before ‘non-applicable’. The unemployed cases, including ‘never worked before’ and other reasons for economic inactivity, are all classified as ‘unemployed and never worked before’.

For the convenience of demonstration, the 999 occupations are collapsed into seven categories, simply using the seven headings of the classification scheme. They are ‘leading cadres of party and government organisations and institutions’, ‘professional and technical staff, middle-rank and ordinary government cadres’, ‘small employers and self-employed workers’, ‘office workers and related staff’, ‘commercial and service workers’, ‘farming, forestry, animal husbandry, fishery and water resources workers’, ‘operators of production and transportation equipments and related workers’ (CGSS, 2003f). The urban population categorised by occupation in this survey can thus be described as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation categories</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leading cadres of party, government organisations and institutions</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and technical staff, middle-rank and ordinary government cadres</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small employers and self-employed workers</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office workers and related staff</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial and service workers</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farming, forestry, animal husbandry, fishery and water resources workers</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operators of production and transportation equipments and related workers</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed and never worked before</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. 1 Population percentages by occupation in urban China, 2003

Source: China General Social Survey 2003
Population: All women and men between 15 and 77 who actually reside in the dwellings in urban China in 2003
Base: 5,894.
Response rate: 77%.
Weight: the combined weight using gender and age based on statistics of the fifth census in 2000.
Valid: 5,339.

1 Middle-rank cadres and ordinary government cadres are newly added in this survey (CGSS, 2003f). Because of the social status of government cadres in China, they are also classified into the category of ‘professional and technical staff’.

2 It is also newly added in this survey (CGSS, 2003f).
According to the literature review in chapter 3, this dissertation defines ‘middle class’ as managerial and professional occupations, business-owners, and civil servants. These occupations can be operationalised, based on the CGSS 2003, as ‘leading cadres of party and government organisations and institutions’, which contain business-owners and managers of enterprises, and ‘professional and technical staff, middle-rank and ordinary government cadres’, which contain professional occupations and civil servants. The percentage of the middle class in urban China in 2003 is 16.4%, as presented in table 6.2. This estimate, leaving out the rural population, is slightly higher than 15.9%\(^1\) calculated by Li (2003).

### Table 6.2 Population percentages by occupational class, urban China, 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation categories</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>83.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China General Social Survey 2003  
Population: All women and men between 15 and 77 who actually reside in the dwellings in urban China in 2003  
Base: 5,894.  
Response rate: 77%.  
Weight: the combined weight using gender and age based on statistics of the fifth census in 2000.  
Valid: 5,339

**Metropolitan population**

The metropolitan population, with the migrant-native division, are defined as people who live permanently\(^2\) in the city districts of the three central municipalities, Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin\(^3\). The population who come for a short visit are not taken into account, as their consumption patterns can hardly reflect the impact of the metropolitan cities. The variables used here are those on migration, sampling frame and residential registration. The procedures to create the measurement of metropolitan population can be described as: (1) figuring out migration patterns, (2) locating population selected from the metropolitan cities by referring to the sampling frame, and (3) generating the measurement of migrants

\(^1\) This estimation is based on occupations, including cadres in government and party, managers, business-owners, specialised technicians and office clerks.  
\(^2\) It refers to those who have stayed and would stay for a long time in the metropolitan cities, not just for a short visit of several months. This definition of metropolitan population does not consider official household registration.  
\(^3\) Due to less developed economic status than the other three municipalities, which was explained in chapter 3, Chongqing is excluded from the metropolitan cities in this dissertation.
and natives living in the metropolitan cities by combining migration and sampling information and cross-checking with the variables on residential registration.

The variables on migration are histories of migration between places up to five times, including year, origin, destination and reasons (CGSS, 2003d: 6), which are similar to the variables on career histories. So the information on ‘the most recent migration’ is obtained in the same way as ‘the current occupation’. The patterns of ‘the most recent migration’ in CGSS2003 can be illustrated by table 6.3.

### Table 6.3 The most recent migration of respondents in the CGSS 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communities of destination</th>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Township</th>
<th>County-level city</th>
<th>Prefecture-level city</th>
<th>Province capital</th>
<th>Central municipality</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Village</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Township</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County-level city</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefecture-level city</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province capital</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central municipality</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,018</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>2,706</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China General Social Survey 2003
Population: All women and men between 15 and 77 who actually reside in the dwellings in urban China in 2003
Base: 5,894.
Response rate: 77%.
Valid: 2,706.

From table 6.3, it can be seen that a total of 304 respondents migrated into central municipalities in the most recent migration, and they form part of the metropolitan population. The estimation of the metropolitan population, however, needs to refer to the measurement of metropolitan areas and the residential information.

1 It refers to the four central municipalities, Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing. But the metropolitan population in this dissertation focuses only on those living in Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin. That is why the population moving into ‘central municipalities’ in table 3.3 need to be adjusted in relation to sampling strata variables, to exclude the immigrants into Chongqing.
Table 6.4 Allocation of samples in stratified areas in the CGSS 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sampling strata</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tianjin</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern province capital</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle province capital</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western province capital</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern county</td>
<td>1,096</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle county</td>
<td>1,620</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western county</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>5,894</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China General Social Survey 2003
Population: All women and men between 15 and 77 who actually reside in the dwellings in urban China in 2003
Base: 5,894.
Response rate: 77%.
Valid: 5,894.

Table 6.4 shows that approximately 20% of respondents are randomly selected from Beijing (6.7%), Shanghai (6.8%) and Tianjin (6.8%). This population group might include a number of short-time visitors, which should be deducted from the ‘metropolitan population’. It is, however, very difficult to identify the permanent residents. On the one hand, the definition of ‘eligible household member’ is rather ambiguous in the sampling document (CGSS, 2003a)\(^1\). On the other hand, Kish sampling is applied to ensure randomness of selection among all ‘eligible’ household members, so the ‘temporary visitors’ might have the same probability of being selected as permanent residents. Because of this, this dissertation has taken into account the variables of ‘site of household registration\(^2\)’ and ‘location of permanent residence registration\(^1\)’ to approximate the metropolitan population as defined above.

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\(^1\) In this document on sampling design, the term ‘eligible household member’ is used four times, but no explicit definition is provided. Only in another document on sampling explanation (CGSS, 2003c), are there some descriptions of it, “First, the ‘household member’ must have stayed in the household for more than a week or would stay for more than a week; whether or not he/she has permanent ‘hukou’ of this household; Second, his/her age should be between 18 and 69, including 18 and 69.” So it is likely for the cases who stay for only a month in the metropolitan city and would leave afterwards to be selected, and they cannot be counted as members of the metropolitan population by our definition.

\(^2\) It contains information on whether a respondent is registered at (1) this address, (2) this city/county/county-level city, (3) this province/autonomous region/municipality, or (4) other province/autonomous region/municipality. But the boundaries between categories are quite ambiguous. For example, if a respondent is interviewed in Beijing, and his/her household is registered in another address in Beijing, he/she could select either category 2 or 3.
As explained above, the migrant-native distinction in this dissertation is mainly because of the economic disparities between regions, especially between the metropolises and the other areas. So the impact of moving between the metropolitan cities, e.g. from Shanghai to Beijing, might be less significant than that of moving from the other areas to the metropolises, e.g. from Yangzhou to Beijing. For convenience, the quantitative analysis classifies people who move within the three metropolitan cities as ‘natives’, rather than ‘migrants’. For example, people who move from Shanghai to Beijing fall into the same category of ‘natives’ as people who were born in Beijing.

Combining information from the variables on migration, strata of sampling, site of household registration and location of permanent residence registration, this thesis classifies the respondents of this survey, who are sampled from the urban areas, into three categories: (1) ‘metropolitan migrants’, people who immigrated into the metropolitan cities at their most recent migration, with origin of the first migration being non-metropolitan cities; (2) ‘metropolitan natives’, with two sub-categories (a) people who have no experience of migration, selected from the metropolitan cities and interviewed at this address, this city/county/county-level city or this municipality, plus with urban household registration\(^2\) (b) people who immigrated into one of the metropolitan cities at their most recent migration with origin of the first migration being this or another metropolitan city; (3) ‘other urban residents’, people who are not allocated in the first and the second categories\(^3\). Under this scheme, the collapsed national population is presented in table 6.5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of population</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan migrants</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan natives</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban residents</td>
<td>92.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China General Social Survey 2003

---

\(^1\) It contains information on the nature of one’s household registration, whether (1) urban permanent, (2) urban valid, (3) rural, (4) other, (6) none, or (8) overseas.

\(^2\) Due to insufficient information provided by the data, it is impossible to identify permanent natives in the three municipalities so this is a proximate measurement.

\(^3\) Because of increasing migration, there are 7.18% of residents with rural household registration in this urban survey. This population might be either people who have been living in the cities for a long time or the ‘temporary visitors’. However, since it is a small sample, this research integrates these respondents into ‘other urban residents’.

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Population: All women and men between 15 and 77 who actually reside in the dwellings in urban China in 2003
Base: 5,894.
Response rate: 77%.
Weight: the combined weight using gender and age level based on statistics of the fifth census in 2000.

It can be seen that the percentage of metropolitan population (7.2%) is much lower than that (20%) estimated by cases selected from the metropolitan cities as shown in table 6.4. The main reason is that the estimation of 7.2% is weighted by the ‘combined weight’ and is thus close to the actual population structure.

It is illustrated in table 6.6 that 14.8% of the population are middle class in the metropolitan cities. This figure is slightly smaller than the percentage of the middle class in the urban areas (16.4%), which result is ‘controversial’ to the ‘common sense’. Because common sense is that metropolitan cities accommodate more (or at least the same) middle class occupations and thus the percentage of the middle class should be higher than (or close to) that in the whole urban areas. One reason might lie in the small sample of the metropolitan population, which leads to a bias in the estimation. Another reason possibly lies in the classification of the occupation categories, which distributed a large number of middle class occupations in the other urban areas. However, the difference in the percentage of middle class in the two populations is insignificant, as shown by the F statistics.

Table 6.6 Population percentages by social class and area of residence, urban China, 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of social class</th>
<th>Metropolitan population</th>
<th>Non-Metropolitan population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>85.2</td>
<td>83.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China General Social Survey 2003

Population: All women and men between 15 and 77 who actually reside in the dwellings in urban China in 2003
Base: 5,894.
Response rate: 77%.
Weight: the combined weight using gender and age level based on statistics of the fifth census in 2000.
Valid: 5,339.
Uncorrected chi2(1) = 0.8094
*Design-based F(1, 98) = 0.4275 P=0.5148

Income groups, age groups and industry
Besides social class and metropolitan population, income group, age group and industry are another three key variables to be used to describe characteristics of the middle class. The creation of the three measurements is more straightforward. Annual income is defined by CGSS 2003 as ‘includes wage, all kinds of bonus, allowance, profit sharing, dividend, net income from business earnings, interests from bank deposits, contributions from relatives and friends, etc’ (CGSS, 2003d). For the convenience of analysis, the continuous variable of annual income is recoded into five income groups, according to the distribution of income among the respondents. They are (1) ’60,000yuan\(^1\) and above’ (2) ‘between 30,000 and 60,000yuan\(^2\)’ (3) ‘between 10,000 and 30,000yuan\(^3\)’ (4) ‘between 5,000 and 10,000yuan\(^4\)’ (5) ‘below 5,000yuan’.

In this survey, age of respondents is measured through year of birth. The age in years is obtained by deducting the reported year of birth from 2003, the year when the survey was conducted. It turns out that the age of respondents’ ranges from 15 to 77, which is slightly different from the survey design\(^5\). With regard to the distribution of age among the respondents, five age groups are produced: (1) ‘15-25’ (2) ‘26-35’ (3) ‘36-45’ (4) ‘46-55’ (5) ‘56-77’.

The quantitative analysis is interested in looking at the industry distribution of the middle class and evaluating the role that the new service sector plays in fostering this population. Similar to the occupation codes, a set of ‘Industry Classification and Codes’ is deployed to record respondents’ working industry in the data. The codes, as many as several hundreds, are collapsed into sixteen categories, with regard to boundaries between industries and potential differences in life chances. The industry categories are (1) agriculture and mining, (2) manufacture and distribution of energy, (3) construction and civil engineering, (4) transport, storage, post and telecom, (5) wholesale and retail, (6) finance and insurance, (7) real estate and resident services, (8) tourism and entertainment, (9) consultancy and IT services, (10) social services, (11) education, culture, broadcasting, and scientific research, (12) organs of state, the party and democratic party, (13) social organisations, (14) other industry, (15) army, and (16) other. It can be seen that the categories from the fourth

---

1. 1 yuan = 0.1 GBP.
2. Including 30,000yuan and excluding 60,000yuan.
3. Including 10,000yuan and excluding 30,000yuan.
4. Including 5,000yuan and excluding 10,000yuan.
5. As stated in the sampling documents (CGSS, 2003a; CGSS, 2003c), people selected by the survey are aged between 18 and 69. This bias might be caused by supplementary cases when the selected person is absent.
belong to the service sector, according to the definition of ‘service sector’ specified in chapter 3.

**Characteristics of the middle class in the metropolitan cities**

This section will illustrate the demographic characteristics of the middle class in the metropolitan cities, with regard to occupation, age, gender, income and industry. It seeks to provide background information for this thesis, concerning the social context where the middle class are formed and reproduced. The distinction between migrants and natives is a main concern, as it will show whether origin of residence would lead to any differences or barriers in social status attainment.

**Occupation of the middle class**

As described in table 6.7, the percentage of the middle class among the metropolitan migrants is higher than that among the metropolitan natives, 22.9% to 13.7%. The difference mainly lies in the higher percentage of ‘professional and technician occupations’ among the migrants than the natives, as shown in table 6.7. This finding reflects the fact that people moving to the metropolis tend to be motivated to achieve higher social status, compared with those who were born in the metropolis. It is also noted that there were no metropolitan migrants holding social elite occupations, as leading cadres of party or government, enterprise, organisations and institutions. The possible reason is the small sample size of the metropolitan migrants, which leads to bias in the estimation. Nevertheless, it can be summarised that the majority of the middle class in the metropolitan cities are in professional and technical occupations or are civil servants, with a higher percentage of middle class population among the migrants than among the natives.

**Table 6.7 Population percentages by occupation in the metropolitan cities, China, 2003**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation categories</th>
<th>Metropolitan migrants (%)</th>
<th>Metropolitan natives (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leading cadres of party, government organisations and institutions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional and technical staff, middle-rank and ordinary government cadres</strong></td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle class</strong></td>
<td><strong>22.9</strong></td>
<td><strong>13.7</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small employers and self-employed workers</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Occupation categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Metropolitan migrants</th>
<th>Metropolitan natives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Office workers and related staff</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Commercial and service workers</strong></td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farming, forestry, animal husbandry, fishery and water resources workers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Operators of production and transportation equipment and related workers</strong></td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed and never worked before</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>41.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lower class</strong></td>
<td><strong>77.1</strong></td>
<td><strong>86.3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China General Social Survey 2003
Population: All women and men between 15 and 77 who actually reside in the dwellings in urban China in 2003
Base: 5,894.
Response rate: 77%.
Weight: the combined weight using gender and age based on statistics of the fifth census in 2000.
Valid: 116 for migrant metropolitans, and 779 for native metropolitans

### Age of the middle class

From table 6.8, it emerges that the metropolitan migrants with occupations of ‘professional and technical staff, middle-rank and ordinary government cadres’ are generally younger than the metropolitan natives in the same occupations, aged averagely at 32 versus at 41. One reason is that there is no observation of social elites, who tend to be older, in the group of metropolitan migrants; for instance, the average age of the natives being ‘leading cadres in party, government organisations and institutions’ is approximately 46. Age groups could nevertheless reveal more subtle differences between the migrants and the natives in age.

**Table 6.8 Average age of middle class population in the metropolitan cities, China, 2003**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation categories</th>
<th>Metropolitan migrants</th>
<th>Metropolitan natives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leading cadres of party, government organisations and institutions</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and technical staff, middle-rank and ordinary government cadres</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle class</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China General Social Survey 2003
Population: All women and men between 15 and 77 who actually reside in the dwellings in urban China in 2003
Base: 5,894.
Response rate: 77%.
Weight: the combined weight using gender and age based on statistics of the fifth census in 2000.
Valid: 27 for metropolitan migrants and 107 for metropolitan natives.
Table 6.9 shows that the majority (39.8% and 44.0%) of the metropolitan migrants are aged at between 18 and 35, with occupations of ‘professional and technical staff, and middle-rank and ordinary government cadre’. By contrast, the metropolitan natives with similar occupations are allocated in each age group more evenly, and the age groups of 18-25 and 46-55 are slightly predominant, accounting for 24.65% and 21.64% respectively. The metropolitan natives with occupations being ‘leading cadres’, as shown in table 6.9, are significantly older than the other middle class natives, with 64.1% aged at between 46 and 55. It is implied, in the finding of the middle class migrants being younger than the middle class natives, that younger age for the migrant population in the metropolitan cities is an advantage for upward social mobility. The reason is possibly that younger age is usually associated with higher education and working in the new industry, which conditions enable easier access to a higher social status. Age, however, is less important for the native population in achieving upward social mobility as they can draw on other resources, for instance, family network.

Table 6.9 Percentages of middle class population by age groups in the metropolitan cities, China, 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metro migrants</th>
<th>Age groups (%)</th>
<th>15-25</th>
<th>26-35</th>
<th>36-45</th>
<th>46-55</th>
<th>56-77</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leading cadres of party, government organisations and institutions</td>
<td>Metro natives</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and technical staff, middle-rank and ordinary government cadres</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China General Social Survey 2003
Population: All women and men between 15 and 77 who actually reside in the dwellings in urban China in 2003
Base: 5,894.
Response rate: 77%.
Weight: the combined weight using gender and age based on statistics of the fifth census in 2000.
Valid: 27 for middle class migrants and 107 for middle class natives.

Gender of the middle class

As far as the ‘professional’ occupations are concerned, there are more males than females in both of two metropolitan populations, although gender difference is slightly more salient among the metropolitan migrants, as described in table 6.10. On the other hand, among the
metropolitan natives, there are significantly more males than females in the ‘leading cadre’ occupations (76.1% versus 23.9%). According to the F test, gender differences as to the two middle class occupations among the native population are not statistically significant\(^1\). It is thus revealed that men and women are generally equal in the metropolitan cities in terms of access to professional and managerial jobs, while elite occupations remain dominated by men.

**Table 6. 10 Percentages of middle class population in the metropolitan cities by gender, China, 2003**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metro natives</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leading cadres of party, government organisations and institutions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and technical staff, middle-rank and ordinary government cadres</td>
<td>76.1</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and technical staff, middle-rank and ordinary government cadres</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading cadres of party, government organisations and institutions</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>31.5,</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and technical staff, middle-rank and ordinary government cadres</td>
<td>56.2*</td>
<td>43.8*</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China General Social Survey 2003
Population: All women and men between 15 and 77 who actually reside in the dwellings in urban China in 2003
Base: 5,894.
Response rate: 77%.
Weight: the combined weight using gender and age based on statistics of the fifth census in 2000.
Valid: 26 for middle class migrants and 125 for middle class natives.
*Design-based F(1, 12) = 2.2351 P=0.1607, based on 125 observations

**Income of the middle class**

According to table 6.11, annual income of the middle class in the metropolitan cities is clustered between 10,000yuan and 60,000yuan in 2002\(^2\). As for the middle class earning an annual income in this range, we are talking about approximately 95% (55.1%+39.6%) of ‘leading cadres’ and 89% (27.7%+61.6%) of ‘professionals’ from the natives, and 80% (36.8%+42.5%) of ‘professionals’ from the migrants. Although more natives than migrants earn an annual income between 10,000 and 60,000yuan, there are more migrants (13.8%) than natives (4.1%) allocated in the high-income group of 60,000yuan and above. In terms of the low-income group of ‘below 5000yuan’, no observations are from the ‘leading cadres’ among both populations, while there are more ‘professional’ migrants than ‘professional’ natives (5% to 0.4%).

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\(^1\) As there is no observation of ‘leading cadres’ occupations among the migrants, F test on gender difference within the middle class migrants cannot be produced.

\(^2\) The annual income refers to the income in the previous year when the survey was conducted in 2003.
Table 6. 11 Percentages of middle class population in the metropolitan cities by occupation and income groups, China, 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metro migrants</th>
<th>Income group (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60000 and above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading cadres of party, government organisations and institutions</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro natives</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and technical staff, middle-rank and ordinary government cadres</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China General Social Survey 2003
Population: All women and men between 15 and 77 who actually reside in the dwellings in urban China in 2003
Base: 5,894.
Response rate: 77%.
Weight: the combined weight using gender and age based on statistics of the fifth census in 2000.
Valid: 21 for middle class migrants and 90 for middle class natives.

In order to compare the income differences between the middle class migrants and the middle class natives, F test with the ‘combined weight’ is produced. As illustrated in table 6.12, it could be inferred from the P value of 0.3834 that there is no significant difference between the two groups. It is hence implied that origin of residence is not a barrier in the attainment of high income in the metropolitan cities. The differences brought by origin of residence could be access to elite jobs or industry as will be shown in the next section. Once a person is recruited, however, the status of being a migrant or a native would not be a factor crucial to make difference in income.
Table 6. 12 Percentages of middle class population in the metropolitan cities by income groups, China, 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income group</th>
<th>Metropolitan migrants (%)</th>
<th>Metropolitan natives (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60000 and above</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 30000 and 60000</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 10000 and 30000</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>58.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 5000 and 10000</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 5000</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China General Social Survey 2003
Population: All women and men between 15 and 77 who actually reside in the dwellings in urban China in 2003
Base: 5,894.
Response rate: 77%.
Weight: the combined weight using gender and age based on statistics of the fifth census in 2000.
Valid: 140 including migrants and natives.
Design-based F(3.06, 36.72) = 1.0491  P = 0.3834

**Industry of the middle class**

As there is no observation from the elite occupations among the migrants and there are as many as 14 categories of industry, the sub-categories of middle class occupations are integrated so as to display a more condensed cross-tabulation. According to table 6.13, the industry distribution of the middle class among metropolitan migrants and natives are quite analogous. The three largest categories for both populations are ‘manufacture and distribution of energy’, ‘education, broadcasting and scientific research’, and ‘organs of state, the party and democratic party’. It can thus be seen that traditional industry still dominates the middle class occupations in metropolitan China. In particular, traditional industries, such as ‘manufacture and distribution of energy’, ‘wholesale and retail’ and ‘transport, storage, post and telecom’, pool more natives than migrants in the metropolitan cities, understandably because natives have more access to these sectors by inheriting jobs from their parents\(^1\) or being introduced by their family members. The new service sector, existing after the economic reforms, however, is also burgeoning, shown by table 6.13. The industry of ‘consultancy and IT service’ attracts 13% of middle class migrants and 8.9% of

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\(^1\) Children were able to enter the same work unit after their parents’ retirement under the planned-economy. The work units allowing inheritance of jobs were usually state-owned enterprises and mainly in traditional industries.
middle class natives. In addition, ‘real estate and resident services’ and ‘finance and insurance’ accommodate 7% of middle class migrants and 8% of middle class natives respectively. There is no significant difference for the allocation of the two populations in the new service sector. Therefore, the new service sector could be confirmed by CGSS 2003 as a space to foster considerable number of the contemporary middle class, as has been indicated in existing literature.

### Table 6. 13 Percentages of middle class population in the metropolitan cities by industry, China, 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry categories</th>
<th>Metropolitan migrants (%)</th>
<th>Metropolitan natives (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and mining</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacture and distribution of energy</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction and civil engineering</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport, storage, post and telecom</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale and retail</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance and insurance</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real estate and resident services</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism and entertainment</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultancy and IT services</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social services</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education, culture, broadcasting, and scientific research</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organs of state, the party and democratic party</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social organisations</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China General Social Survey 2003
Population: All women and men between 15 and 77 who actually reside in the dwellings in urban China in 2003
Base: 5,894.
Response rate: 77%.
Weight: the combined weight using gender and age based on statistics of the fifth census in 2000.
Valid: 26 for middle class migrants and 120 for middle class natives.

### Discussion and implications

So far, a picture of the middle class in metropolitan China is obtained in the early 2000s. The majority of the population have professional or technical jobs or are government cadres, could be male or female, with an annual income between 60,000yuan and
10,000 yuan. The differences between middle class migrants and middle class natives lie mainly in occupation, age and industry but not in income. It is implied from the quantitative findings that the native population have more access to middle class occupations (for instance, the higher percentage of elite occupations and more people working in the traditional industry) but are not privileged in social status attainment. Furthermore, the migrant population are more motivated to achieve upward social mobility, as reflected in the higher percentage of migrants with younger age positioned in the middle class. The insignificant differences in social mobility between the migrants and the natives have important implications for their less divergent consumption patterns, as will be shown below.

**Consumption patterns of the middle class**

This section aims to map the pattern of participation in consumption practices among the urban population. This dissertation will look at proximity and distance of the consumption patterns, enabled by multiple correspondence analysis. The socio-economic indicators that differentiate the consumption patterns are a main interest of the analysis which could shed light on the social context. By preliminary analysis of the consumption patterns, this section will also draw some implications for the qualitative analysis.

**Measurement of participation in consumption practices**

In the survey data, there is a set of variables on participation in societal and personal activities. I selected six variables on purchasing and using material goods and services to create the possibility of measuring each respondent’s participation in some common consumption practices. The consumption practices, indicated by the variables, focus on the purchasing of ‘unnecessary’ goods, eating at a restaurant, use of branded goods, shopping in department stores, use of cultural goods at home, and use of gym services. It can be seen that this survey attempts to measure consumer orientation among the urban population, which is also the concern of this dissertation. The original value labels in the data are agreement scales. They are ‘highly appropriately’, ‘relatively appropriately’, ‘relatively inappropriately’, and ‘highly inappropriately’ upon six statements about each type of consumption mentioned above\(^1\). The agreement scales have been recoded into frequency

\(^1\) The original six variables are six statements on consumption practices: (1) My family and I never purchase unnecessary goods, (2) My family and I always go to a restaurant in celebration of birthdays and other
scales with the labels of the variables being adjusted as well. As for the scales of participation in consumption practices, 1 means frequently, 2 means sometimes, 3 means occasionally, and 4 means never. Thus, this dissertation uses 6 variables with 4 ordinal categories in each variable, which generate 24 modalities in the multiple correspondence analysis.

Use of multiple correspondence analysis

As explained in chapter 5, MCA is a data reduction method, with input of multiple categorical variables and output of factors. This dissertation uses STATA 10.0 to run MCA. Because only frequency weights are allowed in MCA by STATA, this dissertation converted the probability weights, which were used to describe features of the middle class, to frequency weights. It turns out that MCA with the frequency weights produced very similar results with MCA without weights. This thesis adopted the results of MCA without weights.

There are three main approaches to MCA, as addressed by Blasius and Greenacre (2006: 27). One is the Burt matrix, which is a matrix of the two-way cross-tabulations of all pairs of variables. Another is the indicator matrix, which is a respondents-by-categories table with as many rows as respondents and as many columns as response categories. It can be seen that the indicator matrix can be transformed to the Burt matrix. The third one, also recommended by Greenacre (2006a: 70-71), is adjusted MCA, that unifies and rectifies the scaling issue, giving a single solution irrespective of which matrix is considered, with highly improved measures of explained inertia. Since the default approach to MCA in STATA is the Burt matrix, this dissertation simply employs Burt matrix.

The Burt method is analogous to principal component analysis but can be used on categorical variables. It performs a correspondence analysis of the Burt matrix. In the Burt matrix, the variables occur both as rows and as columns. Below is an illustration of Burt matrix of two variables in this dissertation:

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important festivals, (3) I always go shopping at famous department stores, (4) Most durables in my home are high-grade or from reputable brands, (5) My family uses lots of artistic items and paintings to decorate our home, (6) I often go to a gymnasium or fitness centre for exercise.
Table 6. Illustration of Burt matrix of two variables on consumption practices from the CGSS 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Eating at a restaurant</th>
<th>Shopping at famous department stores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FRE</td>
<td>SOM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating at a restaurant</td>
<td>FRE</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SOM</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OCC</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NEV</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping at famous department stores</td>
<td>FRE</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SOM</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OCC</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NEV</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China General Social Survey 2003
Population: All women and men between 15 and 77 who actually reside in the dwellings in urban China in 2003
Base: 5,894.
Response rate: 77%.
Legend: FRE- frequently, SOM- sometimes, OCC - occasionally, NEV- never

After obtaining the biplot of the 24 categories, this dissertation added supplementary variables to the space to examine how the consumption patterns are correlated with socio-economic indicators. As explained by Greenacre (2006a: 31), supplementary variables have no influence on the geometric orientation of the axes; rather, they support and complement the interpretation of the configuration of active variable categories. These points can be seen as additional points in the row or column profile spaces; they have zero mass and thus play no role in the analysis apart from interpreting their positions (ibid.). In the case of Burt matrix, supplementary column principal coordinates are derived as a weighted average of the standard row coordinates, weighted by the supplementary profile.

**Mapping consumption patterns of the urban population in 2003**

By running multiple correspondence analysis, 4 axes over 5,659 individuals are produced. Axis 1 explains 84.29% of variance with principal inertia of 0.169, and axis 2 explains

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1 The row and column coordinates can be obtained through standard coordinates and principle coordinates in MCA. The difference of the two types of coordinates lies in the value of axis that the weighted sum of squares of the set of coordinates is calculated. Both of them, however, locate points at the same relative positions. Principle coordinates are chosen mainly because the scale of them fits the data better.
9.67% of variance with principal inertia of 0.019. From axis 3, little additional variance is explained (2.34% for axis 3 and 0.02% for axis 4), which implies that axis 1 and 2 are two most important axes that need interpretation.

The proximity of engagement in consumption practices among the urban population is revealed by figure 6.1. People who ‘frequently’ eat at a restaurant also ‘frequently’ go shopping at famous department stores, ‘frequently’ purchase branded household durables, ‘frequently’ use artistic items for home decoration and ‘frequently’ go to the gym. Furthermore, the frequencies of ‘occasionally’, ‘sometimes’ and ‘never’ doing these consumption practices are also clustered respectively. The category of ‘frequently shopping for unnecessary goods’ is an outlier though, possibly because the notion of ‘unnecessary goods’ is ambiguous and has confused the respondents. It also bears a negative connotation and is probably a badly worded question in the survey for this reason. However, I also ran MCA excluding the variable of ‘shopping for unnecessary goods’ and it turned out the relative positions of the points were basically not affected and the principle inertia was only slightly changed. So this dissertation kept the variable in the analysis. It is indicated that the social spaces have been segregated by consumption patterns. The socio-economic indicators that differentiate the consumption patterns are demonstrated in figure 6.2 and figure 6.3.

It has been examined in the literature review that factors of social class, age, income and area of residence are associated with consumption patterns in urban China. Therefore, these factors are added into MCA as supplementary variables, as shown in figure 6.2 and 6.3. It is evident that age groups and social classes are firmly located along the first axis (see figure 6.2). From the left to the right, the two variables are arrayed in such a pattern: from managerial occupations to manual workers, and from young ages to old ages. The line of the distinguishing consumption patterns could be roughly drawn between the non-manual occupations (leading cadres, professionals, office workers and commercial workers) and the manual occupations (small employers, farming and forestry workers, operators and the unemployed), and between younger than 36 and older than 36, referring to the categories distributed on the left and the right hand of axis 1. In particular, age is the most important factor that conditions the attributes of the consumption pattern described by axis 1, as it is positioned closely along axis 1 with little vertical distribution along axis 2. Besides, as illustrated by figure 6.3, the consumption patterns of the metropolitan populations are closer to those of the non-manual occupations and the younger people,
while the consumption patterns of ‘other urban populations’ are closer to those of the manual occupations and the older people. The impact of living in the metropolitan cities is, however, less significant than that of social class and age. Hence, axis 1 could be described as consumption patterns mainly differentiated by age and social class. Population with younger age and higher social status more frequently participate in the consumption practices.

As for axis 2, income is the most significant factor that discriminates the consumption patterns defined by this axis (see figure 6.3). Along axis 2, on the top is personal annual income of at least 60,000yuan and lower down is income between 30,000 and 60,000yuan per year; the other income groups are concentrated at the bottom of axis 2, although the low-income groups, 5,000-10,000yuan a year and below 5,000yuan a year, are also distributed along axis 1. The income group of more than 60,000yuan a year is particularly close to the practices of frequently eating at a restaurant, frequently shopping at famous department stores, frequently shopping for branded goods, frequently decorating with artistic items and frequently going to the gym. Accordingly, the income group of ‘between 30,000 and 60,000yuan’ is proximate to ‘sometimes’ doing these practices, and the other income groups are proximate to ‘occasionally’ and ‘never’ doing these practices. The position of the categories of ‘occasionally’ is notably interesting, as they are close to non-manual occupations, younger than 36, living in the metropolitan cities, and annual income between 30,000 and 10,000yuan. This space indicates that the tension between material aspirations and purchasing power is more significant among the young middle class in the metropolitan cities. In summary, it can be inferred from figure 6.3 that axis 2 represents consumption patterns highly correlated with income. The finding that affluent people more frequently select expensive and high-quality material goods and services is consistent with the qualitative finding, which will be discussed further in subsequent chapters.

By examining the contribution of each modality to the variations on each axis, more features of consumption practices by the urban population are revealed. According to table 6.15, the primary axis is mostly interpreted by ‘occasionally’ (35%) and ‘never’ (36.5%), which indicates that the urban population as a whole remain frugal and moderate in consumption although a new orientation to personal pleasure and comfort has emerged. The majority of contribution to the second axis, however, comes from ‘frequently’ engaging in practices aimed at pleasure and comfort, which accounts for 53.1% of the total contribution. Since the second axis is closely associated with income, this finding reflects a
more significant orientation to personal pleasure and comfort among the affluent population. It is therefore confirmed by table 6.15 that the urban population are generally moderate and practical in consumption; those with abundant economic resources more frequently spend on expensive material goods and services, although this dimension is less influential.

*Discussion and implications*

The orientation to personal pleasure and comfort among the urban population in China is implied by the survey findings. It will be further specified in the qualitative analysis what ‘pleasure’ and ‘comfort’ refer to when identified by Chinese people and how they justify the pursuit of pleasure and comfort. The extent to which the new consumer orientation is embraced, however, is differentiated across socio-economic groups. In particular, various modes of ‘frequent’ participation in consumption are clustered on the map but are distant from the categories of ‘never’ doing any of the consumption practices, which is in essence a reflection of social disparity. Age, social class and income are three most important factors that distinguish consumer orientations.

Several implications could thus be drawn: (1) a generational effect is significant in consumption patterns, which reflects the dramatic social changes in contemporary society. This finding can be illustrated by the differences between the interviewees and their parents in expenditure pattern, taste and material aspirations, as will be shown in the qualitative analysis. (2) The difference in participation in consumption practices is more significant between the non-manual and the manual occupations than within the non-manual occupations. The between-social-class difference is echoed by existing Chinese literature, in terms of the middle class involved in more frequent and wider ranges of leisure consumption practices (Wang, 2007; Horizon, 2006: 468). (3) Income plays a less important role in differentiating consumption patterns than age and social class, as axis 2 defined by income explains much less variance than axis 1 defined by age and social class. This finding indicates that consumption is not merely an economic practice, but is shaped by social conventions and social context.

In addition to the implications for the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort, the analysis also points out the distinguishing features of moderation and frugality among the urban population. It is a reflection of the less affluent economic status of the country. More
importantly, it also implies the intentional trade-off between material aspiration and purchasing power among the population. Frugality, as both a strategy and a virtue, plays a central role in the justifications of consumption by the middle class, as will be explained more in the qualitative analysis.
Figure 6.1 Multiple correspondence analysis: axis 1 and 2

-2 -1 0 .5 1

-1 0 .5 1

dimension 1 (84.3%) axis 1

axis 2

1 frequently
2 sometimes
3 occasionally
4 never

-2 0 2 4 6 8 1

dimension 2 (9.7%)

1 frequently
2 sometimes
3 occasionally
4 never

-2 -1 0 .5 1

-1 0 .5 1

shopping for unnecessary goods
shopping at famous department stores
use of artistic items for home decoration

eating at a restaurant
shopping branded household durables
going to the gym
Figure 6.2 Multiple correspondence analysis: 24 modalities and social class and age groups, axis 1 and 2

- shopping for unnecessary goods
- shopping at famous department stores
- use of artistic items for home decoration
- eating at a restaurant
- shopping for branded household durables
- going to the gym
Figure 6. 3 Multiple correspondence analysis: 24 modalities and income groups and area of residence, axis 1 and 2.
Table 6. 15 Contribution of 24 modalities to the variations on each axis, CGSS 2003, multiple correspondence analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consumption practices</th>
<th>Axis1</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Axis2</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequently</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Frequently</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping for unnecessary goods</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to a restaurant on birthdays or festivals</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping at famous department stores</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping branded household durables</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of artistic items and paintings for home decorations</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to the gym</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the demographic characteristics of the middle class in the metropolitan cities and their participation in consumption practices, as revealed by the survey data. It is found that the differences between the metropolitan migrants and the metropolitan natives are insignificant in social status attainment and participation in consumption practices. An orientation to personal pleasure and comfort, tempered with frugality, is emerging among the urban population. The middle class, the young people and the high-income groups display a more significant orientation to personal pleasure and comfort. The quantitative findings have provided background information for the dissertation, by outlining the target population and shedding light on the social context. The arguments constructed from the survey data have also generated useful implications on consumer orientation and its differentiations among the population, which will be compared with and deepened by the qualitative findings. From chapter 7, this dissertation will focus on findings from the interview data, and consumption patterns of the middle class will be formulated from the dimensions of everyday consumption, taste and material aspirations.
Chapter 7 Everyday consumption of the middle class

Introduction

Analysis of the qualitative data will start from this chapter. This chapter will focus on how the middle class organise their everyday life with consumption. At the beginning, the discourse of ‘shopping’ and ‘consumption’ will be discussed, to see how consumption is understood in people’s everyday language. Everyday consumption by the middle class will be illustrated through expenditure categories and financial strategies. This chapter will particularly examine the factors that create differentiated patterns of everyday consumption.

The discourse of ‘shopping’ and ‘consumption’

‘Consumption’ is translated as ‘xiao fei’\textsuperscript{1} in Chinese language. As defined by Xinhua Dictionary, the leading dictionary in China\textsuperscript{2}, ‘xiao fei’ means ‘the process in which people meet the demands of living by using material goods’. It can be seen that ‘xiao fei’ is close to the meaning of ‘consumption’ in English, in the sense of ‘using’ or ‘using up’ something\textsuperscript{3}. This definition also stresses the ‘process’ rather than the moment of exchange, which shares certain ground with the conception suggested by Warde (2010) that consumption is composed of the processes of acquisition, appropriation, and appreciation of material goods. In oral Chinese, ‘xiao fei’ (consumption) is used less rigidly than in written language, and can refer either to ‘using’, ‘shopping’, ‘expenditure’ or all three. So the meaning of ‘consumption’ will be specified in the interview quotes that contain it. In addition to ‘xiao fei’ (consumption), people also use ‘guang jie’ (roam around street)\textsuperscript{4}, ‘gou wu’\textsuperscript{5} (go shopping), and ‘mai dong xi’ (buy things) in oral Chinese under similar circumstances. The phrase ‘guang jie’ usually indicates the same thing as ‘gou wu’, plus there is no correspondent or conventional translation for ‘guang jie’ in English, so this dissertation uses ‘go shopping’ or ‘going shopping’ as the translation when the interviewee mentions either ‘guang jie’ or ‘gou wu’.

According to the interviewees, ‘going shopping’ could refer either to purchasing practices with intentions or just roaming around shops but not necessarily spending money: ‘window

\textsuperscript{1} It can be used either as a noun or as a verb, equivalent to ‘consumption’ or ‘consume’ respectively.
\textsuperscript{4} Can be used as either noun or verb.
\textsuperscript{5} Can be used as either noun or verb.
shopping’. For instance, Joyce, an assistant manager in her 40s, says ‘going shopping\(^1\) is my main leisure activity [laughs] [pause] I spend money almost everyday’. Wendy, a university accountant in her early 50s who also likes shopping as a leisure activity, says ‘in terms of clothes, I like going shopping [for them] and I go very frequently, but I don’t necessarily buy things every time.’ From the rhetoric employed in oral language, it can be inferred that ‘going shopping’ is characterized by time-consuming, pointless and leisure activity. Such a discourse of shopping is also embodied in people’s understanding of shopping and consumption.

When I introduced my research as being about consumption\(^2\), what immediately comes to mind for many interviewees is spending money on clothes or certain particular items, or a kind of activity with the features of ‘extravagant’, ‘feminine’, ‘young’, and ‘time-consuming’. For example, ‘you should talk with my sister, she is more shopaholic than me’ (Olive), ‘I don’t spend money that much, like some of my young colleagues do’ (Matt). A few male interviewees have particularly indicated such perceptions. Phillip, the forty-ish artist, says ‘I don’t do shopping, it’s what women like’, ‘I don’t often go shopping\(^3\) as I don’t like idling in department stores’. Michael, a research and design manager the same age, even thinks that ‘I do no consumption\(^4\) at all’ on hearing of my research topic.

Based on this perception, a number of male interviewees go shopping only when there is a need (for instance Frank and Grey) or go shopping in department stores or supermarkets with their partner at weekends (as Lincoln, Sage and Tom do). Online shopping is instead preferred by several interviewees as it is more convenient.

By contrast, many female interviewees expressed their enthusiasm for shopping\(^5\), especially for clothes, accessories and other items for wearing. Diana and Joyce, who are particularly keen on shopping and even identified themselves as ‘shopaholic’, spend a lot of money on shopping and often go to shops during their leisure time without specific plans. Wendy is a similar case who often goes shopping\(^6\) in her free time and takes it as a hobby, but her shopping aims mainly at her family demands, in addition to dressing herself.

\(^1\) Refers to the more general definition, including both intentional purchases and window shopping.
\(^2\) Sometimes I also say it is about shopping or buying things, in order to make more sense to the interviewee.
\(^3\) Refers to the more general definition, including both intentional purchases and window shopping.
\(^4\) Mainly means purchase and appreciation of material goods.
\(^5\) Refers to the more general definition, including both intentional purchases and window shopping.
\(^6\) Refers to the more general definition, including both intentional purchases and window shopping.
These immediate responses with the embedded discourse of shopping are very similar to those which Miller obtained in North London. Just as proposed by Miller (1998a: 71), shopping conceived as ‘extravagant’, ‘mindless’, and ‘hedonistic materialism’ is a dominant ideology in our time. A more contingent discourse, however, is indicated in focus group studies: mothers with small children were more likely to focus on the trials and tribulations of shopping, while youths place more of an emphasis upon hedonistic browsing (ibid: 69). This gender and age division is also significant in the orientation to personal pleasure among the interviewees, which will be shown in chapter 9.

Despite the stereotype constructed by the discourse, there are also men interested in shopping for certain material goods or window shopping and, vice versa, also women stressing efficiency and frugality in shopping. The discourse embedded in these ‘exceptional’ cases is contrary to the one emphasizing young, feminine, leisure, and extravagant. Charlie, the civil servant in his 50s, is passionate about hunting for and purchasing novel goods, while his wife is more frugal, ‘The person who often spends money (in my family) is ... me, [because] I have the desire to spend money. I would feel uncomfortable if I didn’t spend money in my free time’. Carey, a female entrepreneur at the age of 48, and Zoë, a writer and researcher at the age of 40, show less passion for window shopping by distinguishing themselves from women who spend much time on choosing consumer goods. Besides, a few female interviewees adopt various strategies to select the most appropriate consumer goods at a lower cost or even consider themselves frugal in consumption, which will be explained more later.

It is thus implied that the discourse of ‘shopping’ and ‘consumption’ is differentiated among the middle class in Beijing. The stereotype of ‘going shopping’ by young, female, and rich people cannot apply to the whole population. The consumption patterns are actually varied across socio-economic groups. The analysis of the embedded discourses also sheds light on the context where ‘shopping’ or ‘consumption’ is used by the interviewees. The importance of the discourse of shopping in this dissertation lies in its implications for consumer orientation, which is one thread of my dissertation and will be further articulated in subsequent sections and chapters.

Daily expenditure and consumption
Generally speaking, everyday consumption among the interviewees consists of two parts. One is grocery, including food and daily necessities, mainly purchased in supermarkets; the other part includes clothes, shoes, cosmetics, and other consumer goods which are mainly purchased from department stores at a lower frequency. Most of the interviewees, who sit in offices from 9 to 5 and sometimes have to work overtime, organise their daily consumption in this way. However, for people whose schedule is more flexible, everyday consumption is organised in a less rigid path. For example, Zoë divides her everyday consumption into intentional purchase and window shopping, although window shopping is rare.

The traditional labour division between genders is found in the daily household shopping. Wives tend to go shopping for food and clothes for husband and children, and if a husband is present, wife and husband usually do it together. The differentiation of the two patterns generally depends on the wife having more free time.

In terms of household expenditure, it is hard for the interviewees to recall precise amounts, as they rarely make a record of it in their everyday life. In particular, for some well-off interviewees, a main reason is that ‘it’s a small portion of our salary’, as explained by Green. Similarly, Phillip, the artist who owns a business, is neither clear about family expenditure nor has he calculated it, ‘Maybe several thousand yuan. Because [pause] actually [pause] like the daily expenditure on bills, compared with [my] income [pause], it is not a burden’.

Nevertheless, household expenditure, reported by the interviewees, mainly includes food and groceries, housing mortgages, car expenses, taxis, children’s education and maintenance, clothing, home accessories, cultural goods and events, socialising and leisure and entertainment expenses. Generation is a significant variable to differentiate household expenditure. Generally speaking, a middle class family with husband and wife born in the 1960s or before spend less than those with husband and wife born in the 1970s or after. For example, Wendy, a fifty-ish woman living with husband and son, spends an average of 2,000 yuan every month. By contrast, Michael, in his early 40s, with wife and two sons, spends 10,000 yuan per month on average. In particular, the monthly expenditure of several young single professionals is even more than that of a core family with householders of an older generation. The generation pattern of household expenditure is led by many factors which will be explained more fully below.
Based on the household expenditure and the shopping habits of the interviewees, this chapter will articulate the patterns of the everyday consumption with regard to three main sectors: (1) eating, (2) housing and cars, and (3) clothes, household durables, leisure and other. The investment in children, as a consumption practice shaped by social conventions, will be discussed in chapter 8 together with other family commitments. Financial strategies, as to budgets, savings and investments, will be addressed at the end of this section to show how the middle class manage to keep the balance between expenditure and income. Besides convergence and divergence, the analysis will also be structured by practices and interpretations, following the theoretical framework of the sociology of everyday life. The purpose is to understand the consumption patterns through engagement in everyday life and from people’s subjective interpretations.

**Eating in and eating out**

There are three factors central to the pattern of eating among the interviewees, type of work institution, age and family structure. People who work for state-owned institutions, or were born before 1970, or have meals prepared by parents generally eat at home, free or at a lower cost. By contrast, people who work for non state-owned institutions, or belong to a younger generation, or live by themselves often eat take-away food or at restaurants.

For those who are lucky to be ‘sheltered’ either by work institutions or parents, eating in a canteen or being served at home is the main solution to daily meals. Bella and Charlie, both working for the government, have free meals in a canteen, although they sometimes eat out for a change.

The older interviewees tend to eat in, which is a convention in their generation. Wendy and Hazel often prepare meals at home and are similar in their family catering patterns. They are both in their 50s, work for a university and live with their husband and child. Wendy is an accountant and Hazel is a professor. Both of them are the main person to prepare home meals, including buying ingredients and cooking. Neither of the two families often eats out. Wendy particularly mentions that she does not like eating in restaurants at all, because the food is not healthy but is expensive. In terms of home-preparation, the two housewives insist on quality and the nutritional value of food and would pay for them at any cost. Just as explained by Wendy, ‘as long as we can afford to, we prepare meals in a way, say,
never considering (suan ji) that we wouldn't eat it because it’s expensive’. As a professor, Hazel is busier than Wendy, so she stresses ‘fast and nutritious’ in food provision, and usually has ‘a bigger dinner’. The reason she disagrees with her husband about food shopping is that he often buys cheap food, while Hazel believes ‘higher price, higher quality’. In fact, Hazel is more rigid about the quality standard of food than Wendy. The only place where Hazel buys food is the supermarket, while Wendy buys raw meat in a supermarket but fruit and vegetables in an open-market.

Indeed, healthy, organic and green food is favoured by many middle class households in Beijing. Although income varies among the interviewees, their preference for healthy and green food is common. If eating at home, Lily, the thirty-ish journalist, often goes shopping for ingredients in a market near her home, which supplies green and healthy food and the market ‘must be very expensive in Beijing’. Wing, the doctor with a lower-salary, often goes to a market a long way from her home in order to buy good-quality ingredients at a lower price. Thus, an orientation to personal comfort can be detected in the food consumption.

By contrast, the interviewees born after 1970, if not living with parents or working in non-governmental sectors, often have dinners out, and their expenditure on eating tends to be higher. The pattern of ‘eating out’ in the case of couples is mainly because husband and wife both work and have not enough time to cook. Frank and his wife are both professionals and are very busy. They live by themselves and often have dinner at restaurants, but do not consider eating out expensive.

‘The expenditure mainly includes dinners out and daily groceries, as we have lunch in our workplace. And we eat outside. It’s not expensive, approximately several tens of yuan a day. That is three or four thousand yuan a month including daily groceries.’ (Frank, 31, male, migrant, Product Executive in a leading private IT company)

It is true that the price of eating out in China, if at an ordinary outlet, is not much more expensive than eating at home. Being a CPO (Chief Procurement Officer) with a high

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1 Meaning more varieties of food.
2 This market is a special market for green food, even more expensive than the food in the supermarket.
3 There are various outlets and services for eating out in China at different prices. The cheapest outlet is food stalls, usually temporary without quality guarantee. Small restaurants and take-ways are also very cheap and are sometimes supply very nice food, but the environment is usually not very good. There are also expensive restaurants with good environment and service.
income, John with his wife adopts a similar everyday meal solution. John specifically mentions his preference for eating out, which is the taste of food rather than environment or service.

However, frequent eating out cannot be afforded by everyone, even among the middle class. If frequency of eating out can be used as an indicator of purchasing power, it is found in my interview data that the purchasing power is generally higher among those working in the new industry sector or the profitable sectors, for example, IT, media, industrial design, energy, and real estate. The cases of Frank and John also show that the more affluent interviewees, although they can afford frequent eating out, could also be practical and frugal in their consumption.

In addition to convenience, the reason for eating out is often socialising with friends, clients or colleagues. Lily and her husband often go out for dinner with friends or workmates, which ‘occupies 50% of the total expenditure’\(^1\). If having dinner with friends, the interviewees usually split the bill or pay by turns. In the context of China, eating out sometimes also serves work purposes. For the interviewees who often deal with clients, their patterns of eating are largely shaped by work. First of all, they spend large amount of money on eating at restaurants, which can however normally be claimed back from their company. Zack, the general manager in a state-holding enterprise in his mid-thirties, sometimes has to pay approximately 10,000 yuan for a dinner with clients. Secondly, the schedule of eating and the choice of restaurants are also subject to work demands. Sage, the thirty-ish department manager in a leading real-estate company, goes to socialising dinners very frequently and eats at most two breakfasts at home in a week. Matt, a 40-year-old manager in a leading foreign bank, usually chooses higher-grade restaurants in terms of environment and service to entertain clients.

It is clearly seen that the interviewees are generally enthusiastic about healthy and high quality and convenient food, which implies the pursuit of comfort in the use of material goods. The patterns of food consumption are mainly differentiated by age cohort, type of work institution, and family structure. Besides, women are usually the person in charge of buying ingredients and cooking, if the family often eats at home. Income is also a very important factor in differentiating food consumption. However, the interviewees can generally afford the expenditure on eating, since they can choose the appropriate mode of

\(^1\) Excluding mortgage, I think.
daily catering for themselves. It is therefore shown how food consumption is shaped by traditional values and social conventions. Although the nature and extent differ among the interviewees, an orientation to personal comfort, tempered with frugality and moderation, is implied in their consumption patterns.

**Housing and cars**

Ownership of houses\(^1\) and cars is an important concern of the study of consumption patterns by Chinese scholars, as reviewed in chapter 4. According to my interview data, housing and cars account for a large proportion of household expenditure, and the generation patterns and the migrant-native separation are significant in the amount spent on them.

**Consumption of houses**

Since the real-estate market was developed after the housing reform in the late 1990s, the house has become an expensive commodity. In terms of access to housing, I will consider the patterns of housing consumption by dividing the interviewees into an ‘advantaged group’ and a ‘disadvantaged group’. Three factors are found to be crucial here: type of work institution, age and migration status. In general, people working for governmental institutions, or older in age, or native to Beijing could afford houses at a lower cost, so belong to the ‘advantaged group’. On the contrary, those working for the non-governmental institutions, or younger in age, or non-native in Beijing have to buy or rent houses at a higher cost, so belong to the ‘disadvantaged group’. It needs noting, however, that access to housing is not decisive to the owning of houses. Ownership of houses also relies on income, family background and other factors.

Hazel, White, Hans and Wendy work for government-related institutions (university, state-owned research institution, and state-owned news agency), and have served them for tens of years. They had been allocated decent houses by their work units and have got the ownership at a small cost, around tens of thousand yuan. Young civil servants like Bella and Lincoln are living in flats provided free of rental charge by the government. They are

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\(^1\) ‘Houses’ in this dissertation should not be understood as the terraced or detached houses as in Britain. In China, most people live in apartments, especially in Beijing. Only a few rich people could afford terraced or detached houses which are often called ‘villas’ in China. So in this dissertation, ‘house’ or ‘houses’ refers generally to apartments and flats, unless specifically defined otherwise.
also entitled to an extra housing allowance, which is a social welfare for the young civil servants who have not benefited from the housing allocation policy. Besides housing allowance, another main welfare for civil servants and employees in government agencies is ‘Economically Affordable Housing’ (EAH), as mentioned in chapter 3.

The second feature of having ‘advantaged’ access to housing is being a native of Beijing. Diana and Yvonne, two native females at their late 20s who live with their parents, have no accommodation expenses. By contrast, the interviewees who are migrants in Beijing have to pay expensive rents or mortgages. For instance, Sarah, the thirty-year-old migrant, lives in a relative’s house and pays 1,500yuan a month for her stay, which is an average rent for a room in Beijing.

Age, the third factor, is particularly crucial to the access to housing in a transitional society like China. Generally speaking, the interviewees born in or before the early 1970s have easier access to housing, because of the social policy and lower housing price. On the one hand, the interviewees who were born before 1970 have generally benefited from the housing allocation policy and are even going to buy their second house, for example, Hazel and Wendy. On the other hand, those who were born in the early 1970s or bought their house at the beginning of the 21st century had not caught the last train of the allocation policy but the housing price was still reasonable at that time. Some of them have even gained massive profits by trading their first home.

Zack and Zoë are two typical examples who purchased their houses in the early 2000s and benefited from the boost of the real estate market. Zack, the 33-year-old general manger, bought his first house in 2001 when he was working in Shanghai. He traded it after moving to Beijing, making a profit of 1,500,000yuan. Zoë’s story shows more of the intersection between macro socio-economic transitions and individual consumer decisions. When everyone in her work unit, a sector in the central government, was waiting for the allocation of houses, she bought herself an apartment at only 200,000yuan. She came from Xinjiang and her parental family was not rich, so the purchasing of the apartment was not easy for her. However, it soon turned out that the allocation policy was terminated, and her colleagues had to pay a much higher price and so, later on, for their first house. In 2002,

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1 This estimation is based on an apartment located inside the third or the fourth ring of Beijing and not too remote from the Central Business Districts.
2 It was her first job. She was working in a state-owned research institute at the time of my interview.
3 A autonomous region in the Northwest China. The economic level is much lower than Beijing.
she moved into her second house, which cost her 1,200,000 yuan in total but was valued at least 2,800,000 yuan in 2008, according to her estimation. At the time of my interview, she had paid off the loans. She is very proud of her consumption decision, which enabled her to move into decent and bigger houses earlier than most of her colleagues.

By contrast, housing consumption among the younger generation, who were born in the late 1970s or after, is quite divergent. The younger people who are native to Beijing could stay with parents if unable to afford their own house. However, the advantage of being a native in buying a house is not significant, as housing prices in Beijing are so high that even native parents, if not affluent enough, cannot buy a house for their children. People in this generation have missed the best timing to buy a house at a reasonable price. Furthermore, the majority of middle class people might not be eligible for the welfare of ‘Economically Affordable Housing’, because their income is ‘too high’ to be subsidized or they are not working for the government. It is thus revealed more comprehensively by the interview data that age or timing plays a central role in personal consumption, actually not restricted to housing consumption, in the context of a rapidly transitional society.

Nevertheless, surprisingly it is found that the majority (14 out of 18) of interviewees below 40 years old have actually owned their houses or are going to buy a house in the near future, especially if they are married. Certainly, mortgages are commonly taken on by the middle class in Beijing. One third of the interviewees carry or used to carry these mortgages, including both natives and migrants. The high percentage of house ownership indicates that the middle class, regardless of being a native or a migrant, are relatively more affluent, compared with most other people in the society. They, especially the middle class migrants, are more motivated to achieve a higher social status and have accumulated a higher volume of economic wealth. For instance, although Lily and her husband have to pay a housing mortgage of about 7,000 yuan a month, which is not a small amount for middle class households, they can afford it since both of them have a well-paid and steady job.

However, the ability to buy a house does not mean there is no pressure for the interviewees. Frank is a product executive in a leading internet company. At the age of only 30, he earns a salary of 400,000 yuan a year, plus earnings from his own business. This income is remarkable for a professional of his age in Beijing. Nevertheless, the second house which he purchased in 2007 for 1,300,000 yuan, because the first one is ‘small’ according to him,
has left him in a stressful situation, ‘the house is the biggest expenditure at the moment. Our savings for several years were spent on it’. Similarly, Patrick, an IT professional with an annual income of nearly 500,000 yuan, is going to buy a house in the city centre of Shanghai, which he can afford. However, his expenditure for everyday life will be largely constrained by the huge budget for housing.

‘[...] the biggest feature [of my consumption] is that house [pause], as a special and huge-cost consumer item, is more significant [in expenditure], while other things have become less expensive and less important.’ (Patrick, 27, male, migrant, team leader in a leading IT MNC)

It can be seen that housing accounts for a big proportion of expenditure for the metropolitan population, even among middle class households, which shows how living in a metropolitan city shapes the consumption patterns of the middle class. The complex sentiments towards owning a house indicate the important role that houses play in people’s everyday life, which is a particular social convention in China. The metropolitan impact is very important in understanding the consumption practices, which will be illustrated further.

Besides personal income, sponsorship of parents or partners also helps in the buying of a house. At the beginning of marriage or career, young people in China are generally funded by parents in their housing purchase if parents are able to. As a female in China, even if you have no other access to housing from personal background, marriage could usually help, as according to the traditional values men are in charge of buying a house in a family. Among most of the interviewees who own a house, the payment, or at least the down payment, of the house comes from the husband or the husband’s family. On the other hand, a husband considers buying a house his obligation. Lincoln and Patrick, two young married professionals who are about to buy a house, emphasize that they will not let their wife or her family spend any money on housing, including purchasing and furnishing. Just as interpreted by Patrick, ‘It’s the social value of Shanghainese’. It might be indicated that the gender roles in housing purchase generally remain traditional in contemporary China. The findings of buying houses for children and wife are good evidence of how consumption patterns are shaped by social conventions, which will be addressed more in chapter 8.
Houses, besides their utility values, are also purchased as a means of investment. As mentioned above, several interviewees have sold their first house and made a substantial profit. Moreover, buying a house in Beijing is generally considered a good investment. This perception is a reflection of the ever-increasing housing prices in Beijing and also based on the confidence of the middle class in the market in China.

**Consumption of cars**

Daily expenditure on transport in middle class households in Beijing usually focuses on cars and taxis, of which cars cost more. Ownership of private cars is common. Among the 30 interviewees with their core families, 23 of them own at least 1 car. For middle class households with husband and wife both professionals, the solution to everyday commuting tends to be one car for each person. The seven professionals who do not own a car are either single or live near the work unit, and their age is generally below 30 or above 50. If ownership of a car can be used as an indicator of wealth, it could be inferred that the middle class in Beijing between 30 and 50 are more affluent than other age cohorts⁴.

Type of work institution, especially those related to government, again plays an important part in the use of cars. If you work for government institutions or state-related enterprises with a higher-middle rank in China, you would be very likely to be provided with a car with a driver.

The use of a company car by Olive reflects how the car-consumption can be used as an indicator of social status, not only in academic research but also in everyday life. She is a 38-year-old senior administrator in a large state-holding enterprise and her husband is a business-owner. Although they are both migrants in Beijing, her family is so affluent that she prefers driving her own car, an Audi, rather than the assigned business car. At the beginning of this job, when she went to work in her Audi, her colleagues were confused about her background.

“[...] At the beginning people were curious about what I was doing there. I also looked younger than my actual age at that time [...] People were like, ‘What is this girl doing

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¹ The ‘new’ middle class emerging after 1978, in terms of new occupations and new lifestyles, are generally aged below 50. It is likely that research conducted 20 years later, when this group of population is generally older than 50, would find that the age cohort above 50 is more affluent with a higher purchasing power among the middle class.
here?’ Wondering why I drove an Audi car to work because the department executives either took taxis or drove a car [pause] like Hua’guan⁠¹ at most. People were talking about me [...]’ (Olive, 38, female, migrant, PR executive in a large state-holding company handling food)

The maintenance of a family car is never cheap in Beijing. According to Lily and Frank, the car in their family costs 2,000yuan a month which includes petrol, parking fees and road tolls (yang lu fei). In the case of Lily’s family, a two-person household, the house mortgage of 7,000yuan a month, together with the car costs, takes up 50% of their household monthly income. Nine thousand yuan, the monthly expenditure on housing and car in Lily’s family, is equivalent to almost three months’ salary of a graduate fresh from a university in Beijing⁡².

It can thus be seen that expenditure on houses and cars accounts for a large proportion of household expenditure among the interviewees, and the high housing prices in Beijing have especially imposed pressure on the population. Generally speaking, the type of work institutions, age cohort, and migration status play important roles in the consumption of houses and cars. The interviewees employed by government-related institutions have more advantages in the owning of houses and use of cars. People born in the early 1970s or earlier pay a much lower price for their houses because they were either allocated a house or got their house at a lower cost. The division between the migrants and the natives is significant in the consumption of housing, but is restricted to receiving support from parents: free accommodation or sponsorship in house purchase. Although the interviewees who are migrants, or younger or employed by private institutions are in a relatively disadvantaged position in access to housing, most of them live a well-off life and are confident in their career and the market. The reason can be easily inferred, if one considers the context of how the middle class emerged in contemporary China. The middle class are the beneficiaries of the reforms and their interests are protected as the outcome of the reforms, which situation is very likely to persist for a long time.

Clothing, durables, leisure and other consumption

¹ A Toyota, priced around 100,000yuan. It is much cheaper than an Audi.
² According to a survey, the monthly salary of graduates from ‘211 universities’ in Beijing is 3,000yuan after half a year they leave university. ‘211 universities’ are those with good education and research quality certificated by the Ministry of Education. Source: Sohu net http://learning.sohu.com/20080225/n255353456.shtml [Assessed on January 29th, 2009]
Apart from eating, housing and cars, other expenditure sectors among the interviewees focus on clothing (clothes, shoes, handbags, accessories), daily care (cosmetics, skin cares), home accessories and durables (bedding, furniture, decorations), digital products, cultural goods and events (disks, books, internet, going to cinema, concerts and matches), leisure and entertainment activities (travelling, going to clubs, going to Karaoke, hiking, camping, horse-riding), fitness (gym, massage, sports), family insurance, children (living, education, toys, entertainment), and other (such as wedding gifts). Consumption of clothing is very important in people’s everyday life, from which the consumer orientation and the varied patterns of consumption can be detected. Consumption patterns in these categories will be formulated with regard to clothing and the other categories.

The locations for buying clothes, shoes, handbags, accessories and other items of dress are mainly differentiated by income. The better-off entrepreneurs, Carey and Tom, often go to luxury shopping malls, such as Yan Sha, Guo Mao and Xing Guang Tian Di, depending on which one is convenient for them. In addition to domestic shopping malls, the more affluent interviewees also go shopping overseas, looking for better quality and reasonable price. Just as explained by Olive, the 38-year-old PR executive, ‘generally we would prefer to buy such big brands [e.g. LV and Gucci] in Hong Kong. I haven’t bought many at home’. The less affluent interviewees, on the contrary, often go shopping at local shops and are more careful in consumer decisions.

There are different reasons for shopping overseas among the interviewees, from which differential tastes are indicated. Several interviewees stress the aesthetics of the consumer goods in the overseas market. Diana, the 28-year-old professional, often goes to Hong Kong for business trips and appreciates the design of consumer goods there, ‘they are really beautiful and completely win out in aesthetics [over the consumer goods in the mainland]’. The preference for designs from overseas manufacturers reflects global ‘top-down’ effects to some extent. The tastes of the interviewees seem ‘disciplined’ by the global corporations and imported consumer goods are thus associated with higher value. It is possible that an ordinary Western brand is raised to a more prestigious status in China with a higher price. Taking into account aesthetics and price, consumers certainly prefer shopping overseas if possible. However, a few other interviewees, who are generally more affluent, place emphasis on the reliable quality of the products from overseas manufacturers. Olive often goes to Hong Kong for shopping. Unlike many other people who like the duty-free goods there, Olive buys daily essentials such as shampoo and
medicine, because she believes the products supplied by the shops in Hong Kong are better quality. Although taste among the interviewees is differentiated, a similar consumer orientation is implied - the pursuit of pleasure and comfort.

Instead of luxury shopping malls and shopping overseas, most of the interviewees tend to go shopping in traditional department stores where consumer goods are cheaper. Shopping outlets¹, a new shopping location for bargain branded goods recently available in China, are very popular among the interviewees. Julia and Patrick are two thirty-ish professionals in foreign companies and claim to have passion for shopping. They would like to travel a long way to shop in outlets with their partners, where they can pick up ‘big’ brands at ‘small’ prices. It can be seen that the majority of the interviewees who are not extremely wealthy are more careful in consumption by selecting the right shops and spending money moderately.

The nature and extent of the carefulness is also varied by gender, which is consistent with the stereotypes about ‘shopping’ to some extent. The male interviewees stress comfort and convenience in shopping and appear less keen on clothes shopping. On the contrary, the female interviewees tend to be more sophisticated in consumer decisions as they are generally more enthusiastic about shopping and are thus more anxious about their purchasing power.

The female interviewees usually purchase both branded goods from department stores and bargains from small shops, instead of purchasing only expensive branded goods by relying on credit. Sarah, Flora and Julia, the three thirty-ish professionals working for foreign companies, particularly refer to this ‘combination strategy’. Sarah describes her shopping as ‘two extremes’: either casual clothes from the export-aimed shops² or more formal clothes from luxury stores. Flora, whose income is higher, also prefers bargain clothes from small shops and quality shoes from reputable manufacturers. The context of this strategy, as mentioned by them, is that the prices of clothing have increased in recent years and fashion changes fast.

¹ Shopping malls which sell designer goods or reputable brands at discounted prices. They are usually located in the suburban area.
² These shops sell copies or leftovers from factories which are manufacturers of big brands. As the original purpose for these products are export, they are called ‘export-aimed shops’. These shops have become very popular among young professionals.
Thus, the sophisticated strategies in shopping are essentially a reflection of frugality and moderation and the context of a fast developing country. Nevertheless, shopping is not only an issue about purchasing power and gender stereotype, but also associated with taste. Charlie, the 57-year-old middle-ranked civil servant, is interested in novel material goods, such as a new type of wine or a home decoration with unique functions. So he often spends his free time idling in open-markets, second-hand markets and supermarkets, hunting for those consumer goods. By contrast, Grey, who works in luxury industry with a lower income than Charlie though, does most of his shopping, including grocery, clothes and other items, in an expensive shopping mall near his workplace, and ‘would never go to an open market’. One reason for his consistency in shopping location is that his friends and colleagues often go shopping in the same mall as well. It can be seen that taste and social interaction also play important roles in shaping consumption habits.

Against this background, online shopping stands out as a good option for people pursuing pleasure and comfort but having relatively lower purchasing power or little time. Thus, it is especially popular among the young interviewees. Bella, Flora, Frank and Julia, who are thirty-ish young professionals, often participate in online shopping and find it more convenient, economical and reliable than traditional modes of shopping, because it saves time and money and can also check the credit of the sellers which could secure the deal to some extent. The commonly purchased items online are skin-care products, cosmetics, home accessories and cultural goods, like discs and books, although more experienced customers like Frank and Bella also purchase household durables and groceries online.

In terms of household durables (except cars), the families of the interviewees generally own TVs, refrigerators, air-conditioners and computers, and some of the families own more than one of each. Expenditure on household durables is not high, and much of it focuses on renewal of these durable goods, for example a new refrigerator. However, the young professionals who are digital fans (Bella, Flora, Frank, Lincoln, Patrick and Green) spend more money on digital products, some of which are often household durables. The massive investment usually comes from the repeated upgrading of these consumer goods, which sometimes causes anxieties and ambivalence, although not very significant: to pursue the latest fashion or to make the most of the owned ones? Digital products can bring pleasure and fun, as explained by the interviewees. The preference for these material goods implies the orientation to personal pleasure, which will be addressed more in chapter 9.
A frequently mentioned expenditure is leisure and entertainment consumption. It is found that in their everyday life the interviewees participate extensively in travelling, going to Karaoke, going to clubs, horse-riding, sports and gym or massage. Tourism and holidays are favoured activities among the interviewees, which will be addressed further in chapter 9. Some of the leisure activities are not cheap, for instance horse-riding at a rate of 160yuan per hour and a massage membership card costing 5,000yuan a year, but they can afford it. The leisure and entertainment plans, similar with eating-out, are sometimes involved with socialising with friends, colleagues and clients.

Besides all the above household expenditure, family insurance on health and life, which usually costs a lot of money, is particularly mentioned by the interviewees who live with their young children or parents. The insurance for Joyce’s three-person family costs 30,000yuan a year. Olive and her husband spend 30,000 to 40,000yuan a year on their family insurance (including that for Olive’s parents). Julia’s family, although less affluent than Joyce’s and Olive’s, also has to pay 10,000yuan a year for the insurance of her three-person household. In terms of the enthusiasm for insurance, the lifestyle of the middle class in Beijing seems close to that of their Western counterparts. However, the high investment in insurance is also a reflection of the anxiety about the incomplete social security system, just as complained by Phillip and Michael, two well-off male interviewees. That is why they choose to reckon on themselves for the assurance of a well-off life after retirement or in case of any emergency. This concern with consumption in the future or ‘just in case’ constrains expenditure on material goods bringing pleasure and comfort, which might also explain why the new consumer orientation is tempered with frugality among the interviewees.

This section has examined the main sectors of everyday consumption. It is revealed that income plays a crucial role in distinguishing clothes consumption. In addition, gender and tastes also differentiate expenditure patterns and use of material goods. The pursuit of pleasure and comfort is detected in the consumption practices. The new elements in consumer orientation, however, are tempered with the more traditional values of frugality and ‘saving for a rainy day’, as shown especially in the shopping strategies and the considerable expenditure on family insurance.

**Family finance and strategies**
Family finance, the way people manage their income and organise expenditure, is important in understanding consumption patterns. First, the economic status of the middle class in Beijing can be indicated, as to in a general sense whether they are living a well-off life or stressed by their purchasing power. Second, the consumer orientation of the middle class can be implied from their financial strategies, whether they seek to meet their material aspirations as much as possible or try to keep their consumption moderate. Third, the gender roles, with regard to who is in charge of family finance, can also be revealed, which could help to explain the gender differences in consumer orientation.

Among the interviewees, only a few families budget for household expenditure but no family spends beyond their income, and there is usually balance every month. Especially among the affluent ones, the balance between expenditure and income is not a main concern. Carey, Tom and Olive found there is 'no need' to save money. As Olive evaluates, ‘it's like there is 10yuan and I just spend 3 to 4yuan’. In daily family finance, the interviewees generally do not use savings as their main financial strategy, which is contrary to the stereotype of Chinese people. Instead, they rely more on income from various sources. One third of the interviewees have taken part in the financial market, investing in stocks, funds, properties and other financial products. The financial strategies thus explain why the interviewees generally have higher purchasing power, which is particularly enabled by the market.

However, it is also implied from the financial strategies that the middle class in Beijing struggle with the tension between purchasing power and material aspirations. On the one hand, an orientation to personal pleasure and comfort is significant among the interviewees, as revealed by the above evidence, which means that the priority of the interviewees tends to be pursuit of pleasure and comfort rather than expansion of savings. On the other hand, living costs in Beijing are very high. As mentioned above, children and the ‘emergency and retirement money’, due to the incomplete social security system, all cost a large proportion of income. Just because the traditional strategy of saving cannot meet their demands, the interviewees have to turn to more productive ways of accumulating wealth. For example, Flora, the 27-year-old professional, although earning a very good salary, suggests that ‘it is meaningless to save money’, because it is difficult for her to buy another house if she relies only on savings. Thus, the interviewees invest in business or the financial market to enhance their purchasing power.
Another strategy to deal with this tension is to constrain their expenditure, which might be a distinguishing feature of the Chinese middle class. Instead of meeting their material aspirations as much as they can, the interviewees generally purchase what they can afford and use debt selectively. Although housing mortgages are commonly used by middle class households, debts and bank loans are not often used for everyday consumption. Several young interviewees use credit cards, e.g. Flora, Diana and Joyce, but they usually make full payment every month, as Diana says ‘it’s not good to owe money’. On the contrary, the older interviewees aged at 50 or above do not often use credit cards. For the more affluent interviewees, the reason is that they have enough cash to pay for daily expenditure, as explained by Carey. For the other people, the reason is that they do not like borrowing money from banks or from other people. As indicated by Hazel, Wendy and Charlie, the interviewees in their 50s working for government-related institutions, they will give up the consumer goods or services if they cannot afford them. The selective use of debt again shows the feature of frugality in the consumption patterns of the middle class. This financial strategy also comprises an important justification of their tastes, as will be discussed in chapter 9.

In terms of family finance, household income among my interviewees is mostly managed by both husband and wife. Hence, there is no significant division in whose money is used, and shopping decisions on ‘big pieces’, costing thousands of yuan or more, are usually made by both husband and wife. Under the scheme of ‘mixed household income’, there are variations in who pays for a larger amount of household expenditure, depending on who earns a higher income in the family. If the husband does, he often pays for daily household expenditure, while the wife often pays for her own expenditure if she has an income. By the same token, if the wife/girlfriend earns a higher income (in the cases of Yvonne, Hazel and Zoë), she often pays for a larger portion of household expenditure (for example when going out or buying household durables) and the husband/boyfriend pays for a smaller portion. Besides, there are also middle class households, only a few though, managing their incomes separately.

Although traditional gender roles exist when the husband earns a higher income, more equal gender roles are found in family finance among the interviewees. When earning a higher income in the family, women could also pay more for household expenditure. Therefore, it seems that a more equal gender scheme among the middle class in Beijing is emerging, although it intersects with the traditional gender roles in certain areas of family
life. This gender scheme can thus explain why there is no significant gender difference in the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort, since both women and men have control over their individual income and even household income. Because women retain the key role in household shopping and men usually earn a higher income, it is also understandable why the orientation to personal pleasure is more significant among men and single young women, which will be discussed further in chapter 9.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has analyzed how the interviewees organise their everyday life, according to major expenditure headings. It is shown that generation, type of work institution and income play important roles in differentiating the patterns of everyday consumption. The impact from generation and type of work institution reflects the rapid social changes and the particular social context in China. The migrant-native division is insignificant in most areas of consumption, except that some native parents are able to provide more financial support. Through the elucidation of practices and subjective interpretations, the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort, intersecting with the traditional value of frugality, is implied in the patterns of everyday consumption. The interactions as well as social conventions that frame everyday consumption will be further elaborated in the next chapter.
Chapter 8 Consumption and social conventions

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the consumption patterns of the middle class in relation to social conventions and social contexts. According to the interview data, the conventions of family commitment and gift-giving and social interactions have significant impact on the purchase and use of material goods and services. Besides, the intergenerational differences not only reflect social changes but also illustrate how consumption practices are framed by different social contexts. This chapter\(^1\) aims to demonstrate how the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort is tempered by traditional values and this is crucial to understanding the consumption patterns.

Consumption to fulfil family commitment

In addition to satisfying one’s own material aspirations, the purchase and use of material goods can also be used to fulfil family commitments. It is found that investment in children and support of parents are the two most significant family commitments among the interviewees.

\textit{Investment in children}

Investment in children absorbs a large proportion of expenditure among middle class households, besides housing and cars. The extent of dedication to their children is similar between the interviewees and their parents. The difference, however, lies in the purchasing power, motives and the emphasis of the investment.

Expenditure on children, according to my interview data, focuses mainly on education, healthcare, insurance, entertainment and marriage. The interviewees not only try to provide an affluent life for their children, but aim at their future well-being. The younger interviewees, particularly those with higher income, often invest even more in their children. Olive, the 38-year-old PR executive, is pregnant at the time of my interview, and

\(^1\) It needs noting that because gender is a very important factor differentiating consumption patterns, the impact of gender roles are analyzed in specific consumption practices so they are not particularly discussed in this chapter.
she has already bought the imported milk powder, the premium bath basins (300yuan each), and the nail clippers made in Japan (80yuan each). Although she does not want to spoil her son, she cannot control herself in the investment since she can afford it, ‘[…] but you still want to buy the best [things] for him’.

The interviewees generally pay close attention to their children’s education. They start the investment when children are very young and also plan for their future education, usually including studying overseas, and stock funds for it. Tom, the 36-year-old senior administrator, pays 30,000yuan a year for his child’s kindergarten. However, he thinks that this price is reasonable, since his colleague’s child’s nursery costs 5,000yuan a month. In addition, it is a common plan to support children study abroad among the interviewees, which is a reflection of the higher purchasing power, compared with the lower-class parents.

The orientation to pleasure and comfort is also detected in the way of developing children’s interests and capabilities. Michael, the forty-ish research and design manager, is a typical case. He earns 40,000yuan a month, and his wife works in General Motors, so their life is quite well-off. They have two sons, one is aged 6 and the other is 8. He likes investing in the field of ‘fun’ for children, because ‘it’s just time for them to set up [sic.] [pause] to increase their social skills, and these [the courses] are good for health’. Besides sending them to an exclusive private school, Michael also signed up his children on courses in taekwondo, piano, tennis, skating, horse-riding and swimming. The school tuition fee for a child is 10,000yuan a year, plus the fees for the extracurricular courses, so the total cost for two children is expected to be 50,000yuan annually. But Michael can afford it, ‘they are nothing compared with my salary, although higher than state schools.’

This investment agenda is particularly related to his experience of studying in Canada. Many Chinese students, as he observed, led a boring life which was limited to university and home, while students from Western countries know how to live a good life, for example playing various sports and games. That is why he pays more attention to the social skills and broad interests of his children and hopes that they will enjoy life when studying abroad. The consumer orientation to pleasure and fun is significant in the investment in children in the case of Michael. The pursuit of pleasure is legitimate according to him, as a happy life is as equally important as achievement in work.
Generational differences in consumption for children are significantly shown in the emphasis of investment. The older interviewees, at fifty-ish or older, remain conservative and emphasize financial contribution to children. This can be seen from the extensive support of children’s study, welfare and even housing for marriage.

By contrast, the younger parents or parents-to-be tend to stress the ‘spiritual’ investment in children, e.g. love, care, and communication, which is an important generational difference in consumption. Laura, the 27-year-old sales manager, points out that sacrificing their own material aspirations in order to support children, as her parents did, is not proper either for parents or for children. Instead, she will establish a more equal relationship with her children and give them more encouragement and instruction.

"My parents are like this, save their food and clothes to let you live better and support your study [...] I think this is insane: that you impose your own sacrifice onto others. As to my children, I would think that they can choose their life, go ahead [sic], tell him which is better, which is wrong, but I’ll never tell him what to do, that’s stupid [sic]." (Laura, 27, female, migrant, sales manager in a private-holding five-star hotel)

The emphasis of spiritual contribution shows the perception, which is common among the young parents, that too affluent material life might spoil their children. For example, Zack thinks that ‘it’s not proper to give a kid too many things’. This transition in the emphasis of investment in children is a reflection of social changes, as will be explained in more detail below.

Based on the above analysis, my dissertation has thus enriched and updated existing knowledge about middle class parents. As shown in various consumption domains, the interviewees emphasize their own well-being whilst investing extensively in children. It hence confirms and expands the finding from Davis & Sensenbrenner (2000) that contemporary Chinese parents indulge both their children and themselves. Furthermore, my dissertation has explored the underlying justifications. It is generally accepted, especially among the younger parents in Beijing, that the financial contribution to children is not more urgent than the gratification of oneself; plus, the spiritual guidance and care of children is more important than the financial investment. It is thus implied that pursuit of personal pleasure and comfort is equally important with financial contribution to children.
This consumer orientation is very important for understanding the consumption patterns of the middle class, which will be further illustrated in chapter 9.

**Obligations towards parents and other family members**

In the context of China, children are obliged to support their parents and this obligation is prescribed by law\(^1\). However, supporting parents, or ‘filial piety’, is deemed a virtue in Chinese culture, and for most people this practice is not regulated by law but by morality or kinship. That is why no interviewee has mentioned the law when talking about commitment to their parents. Instead, the sense of obligation is very significant. The interviewees generally consider looking after parents, both financially and spiritually, as their obligation. In this context, purchase and use of material goods can be understood as the nexus of the practices of family obligation.

Expenditure on parents is especially obligatory if parents are dependent and are not entitled to retirement allowance or not covered by social welfare\(^2\). Sage, who is from a rural area in the Northeast, is a typical case. He has brought his parents, who are entitled neither to retirement allowance nor to social insurance payments, to live with him. As the main bread-winner, he pays for the whole household expenditure, and even bought a house at the seaside for his parents which he thinks is good for their health.

Even if parents have their own income, the interviewees also contribute financially for economic and spiritual reasons. In the consideration that their parents are more frugal and all the money received would be saved, the interviewees prefer to use various material goods and services, including durable goods, food, clothes and leisure trips, to make their parents’ life more comfortable and pleasant. Since his parents tend to constrain their material aspirations, Zack, the 33-year-old general manager, has made efforts to identify the material goods that are needed but his parents are too frugal to buy, for example a new computer. Furthermore, the younger interviewees between 25 and 35 years old, e.g. Zack, Frank and Flora, particularly like to send parents material goods or services that bring pleasure, for example digital products and holidays. Frank has bought several digital products for his parents, including an LCD and a Wii kit, as he believes these material

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\(^2\) Because of historical reasons, some rural residents and some old people who did not have a permanent job before their retirement are not entitled to the social welfare system. But more and more rural residents and people who are unemployed in contemporary society are eligible for social welfare.
goods will bring pleasure to them. He has also paid for his parents to go on holiday. Besides, several interviewees have bought or are going to buy a house for their parents. However, this financial contribution can only be afforded by a small number of affluent interviewees.

According to several other interviewees, money is also sent to parents as a means of family commitment. It is salient that the money given to parents is particularly considered as a ritual to show gratitude, if parents have their own income. Zack usually gives 5,000yuan to parents during spring festivals to fulfil this kind of ritual, ‘parents need this money spiritually, not for financial reasons.’

Gender differences are found in family obligation. Compared with the female interviewees, the sense of obligation as to looking after parents is more significant among the male interviewees, especially those from a less well-off parent family background, because in traditional values sons are considered the backbone of the family. That is why early when they were university students and at the beginning of their career, Sage and Tom used to be anxious about being incapable of taking care of parents and siblings, because of insufficient income. As income rises, both of them try their best to fulfil family obligations. Just as interpreted by Tom,

‘[...] like people of our age, from a family without a strong [rich] background, and have siblings, you build up a career by yourself and you have to carry out some family obligations. It’s not required, but you will do it unconsciously.’ (Tom, 36, male, migrant, Chief Business Administrator in a middle-scaled private company specialised in media)

In addition to gender differences, the patterns of family obligations to parents are also varied by generation. People who are over 30 usually give money or material goods to parents more regularly. In this group, the older interviewees tend to give money or material goods to parents every month, while the younger interviewees usually give gifts to parents during festivals or on parents’ birthdays. By contrast, the interviewees between 20 and 30 give money or material goods to parents less regularly. Yvonne’s income is relatively low and she gives money to parents only when there is a surplus. Although Patrick has a higher income, he does not give money to his parents every month either, partly because his parents have their own income and Patrick has to save money for his own house.
One possible reason for the generation difference is that people younger than 30 are mostly the single child in their family and so are more privileged than the children in earlier generations. A more underlying reason, however, is that parents of this generation tend to have a higher income and tend to be entitled to better social welfare provision, due to the reforms since 1978 and the rise of the economy. Hence they are more economically independent. In fact, parents of this generation tend to support their children even when their children have an independent income, which can be inferred from the sponsorship in housing and marriage by parents according to several young interviewees. A third reason for the generational difference is the much higher living costs among the younger generation. The disposable income of the younger interviewees, no matter with a higher or a lower income, is constrained to some extent. Thus, if parents have their income, the younger interviewees tend to pay for their own various costs, e.g. houses or child-rearing expenses, rather than contributing regularly to their parents.

The migrant-native division, however, is not significant in the obligation to parents. Some migrants also live with their parents and some others have an affluent parent family background. Therefore, there are no significant differences determined by place of origin in the frequency of sending material goods or money to parents or the amount of money spent on parents. On the contrary, gender and age generate more salient differences in family obligations as mentioned above. A helpful implication, however, can be drawn that obligations to parents among the middle class are so intensive that these could transcend geographical distances and the difficulties in fulfilling the commitments.

Therefore, it is revealed that consumption for parents plays a crucial role in the everyday consumption of the middle class in Beijing. As stressed by the interviewees, it is both obligation and virtue that children look after parents once they have an independent income. Furthermore, according to a few interviewees, family obligations also generate a sense of achievement. Although among the young generation below 30, Laura sends money to her parents every month which she conceives as responsibility and ‘pride’. Even for Tom, sense of achievement is less from the satisfaction of his own material aspirations, but more from taking good care of his parents. That is why he used to be anxious when he was unable to help his parents.

‘The biggest advantage [of being affluent] for me is the elimination of worries. […] I'm not concerned whether they have insurance or not […] I don't need to focus on these issues.'
Even if there isn't [insurance], I can handle it.’ (Tom, 36, male, migrant, Chief Business Administrator in a middle-sized private company specialised in media)

According to Warde and Martens (2000), sense of achievement and pleasure derived from family commitments is conceptualised as ‘instrumental pleasure’, related to ‘making successful presentations of self’, and ‘social pleasure’, stressing mutuality and sharing. The typology of gratification will be further explicated in the aesthetic justification of taste in chapter 9.

In addition to parents, siblings are also the target of family commitments for several interviewees, but most of the commitments are in the form of financial aid. Bella, Sage, Phillip, Tom and Zoë all assist their brothers or sisters and never ask for return. However, compared with the strong sense of obligation for parents, aid to siblings sometimes causes ambivalence. Zoë has the most successful career among her siblings, and has offered various forms of financial aid to her sisters and brothers. However, this help is not enough in the eyes of her parents. This feedback from parents has upset Zoë, who feels it unfair to sacrifice herself for other people.

“There is an ‘unhealthy’ atmosphere that my little brother and I are better-off so we should sponsor other siblings. We fight by ourselves. Since you are also healthy, why do you let others help you but don’t help others?’” (Zoë, 40, female, migrant, writer and researcher in a state-owned research institute)

Family commitments to relatives turn out even weaker and more limited than those to parents and siblings. Although he is attentive to his parents and even bought a house in Beijing for them, Phillip, the 40-year-old entrepreneur doing art business, rarely supports relatives financially, as ‘there is no obligation involved’. Charlie, the 57-year-old civil servant, holds the same viewpoint of limited obligation. He gives money and material goods regularly to his aunt, as his parents have passed away, but avoids excessive financial aid to the children of his aunt. This pattern of family commitment, in which the sense of obligation weakens from parents to the extended family, is consistent with the model of ‘differential mode of association’ described by Fei (1992). According to my data, children and parents are usually positioned close to the centre of the concentric network. This pattern of social ties is actually quite common among Chinese people. It can thus be
explained why the interviewees are generally more dedicated to their children and parents both financially and emotionally.

Fei’s model is also helpful for understanding the finding that the interviewees are generally less keen on charity and donations than their middle class counterparts in the Western societies. As shown in my data, kinship is usually positioned closer to a person in one’s social network than strangers. Among all the interviewees, only Bella, the 29-year-old civil servant, mentions that she sponsors three children living in remote villages through a charity project, and the donation is 1,000yuan a year which is ‘not much’ for her. It can be inferred that the middle class in Beijing would generally help people related to them rather than make donations to strangers.

Thus, it is revealed that the interviewees are generally keen on family commitments, and the sense of obligation is especially significant on children and parents. There is not much difference in the desire to provide a well-off life for their children, except that the affluent people can afford more expensive material goods and services. This finding is consistent with Davis and Sensenbrenner’s (2000) and Wang’s (2007) that parents from all social classes try to meet the demands of their children as much as possible. However, younger middle class parents in contemporary China tend to place emphasis on instruction and love, rather than excessive material goods. This finding has updated existing knowledge about investment in children. A finding that is distinct from existing literature is the motives for the investment in children. It is argued that parents purchase material goods for children for the sake of display of family social status, e.g. by Fan (2000). However, the contribution to children, as shown in my dissertation, aims more at the well-being of children and as a ritual to manifest love.

My dissertation has examined consumer culture in relation to family commitments, which perspective has rarely been explored in the existing scholarship. The interviewees generally look after their parents both financially and spiritually by contributing money or material goods or both. Gender and age play important roles to differentiate the patterns of obligation to parents. The sense of obligation and the responsibilities involved in the family commitments, however, generally decrease from parents to siblings and other relatives. The elucidation of family commitments has generated important implications for consumer orientations. The young people who show a more significant orientation to personal pleasure and comfort also want to share pleasure and comfort with their family.
and encourage pursuit of them in their children and, to some extent, in their parents. Therefore, the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort in contemporary China has very distinct features and operates in a different way from the ‘consumerist orientation’ originated in the West. The point is that the new set of consumer orientation in China cannot be thought to be imported or diffused from the West but has very complicated working mechanisms.

Based on these findings, family commitments to adult kin in China show different features from those in Britain. The most significant divergence lies in the underlying rules. Finch and Mason (1993) showed that British people tend to develop commitments over time and in ways which are possibly half-recognised but often not consciously planned. They argued that parent-child relationships – particularly ‘down’ the generations – are located within this framework of ‘developing commitments’, rather than the idea of fixed rules of obligation (ibid: 168). Furthermore, the kin responsibilities for parents are not particularly distinguished from those for siblings and other relatives in Britain (ibid.). In Chinese society, however, commitments to parents and to siblings and relatives operate by different rules. The commitments to parents operate in the rules of obligation, partly because they are prescribed by law. However, the sense of obligation among the interviewees is more significant than the rule of obligation, and therefore the commitments also appear unconsciously planned. Instead, the operation of the responsibilities for siblings and relatives is closer to the rule of ‘developing commitments’, in which a pattern of reciprocal assistance builds up over time. The distinct nature of family commitments for adult kin between the two societies is possibly because of different historical trajectories and social contexts. During the time when income sources were limited and the social security system was not well-established in China, parents in their old age were supported mainly by children, especially by sons. That is part of the reason for the traditional value of ‘raising a son for the later years’ (yang er fang lao). In addition, social ties in Chinese society follow ‘the differential mode of association’, as illustrated by Fei (1992), and it is common that commitments to parents and the core family are more important than those to other social ties. On the contrary, Britain developed its industry and market earlier and over a long period of time, when income sources expanded and the social security system was established so parents are less dependent on their children.

**Intergenerational differences**
Dramatic economic and social changes in China in the last fifty years have resulted in generational differences in consumption patterns. This section will look further into the differentiated patterns of consumption shown by generations, by focusing on the comparisons revealed in the interviews between the interviewees and their parents and between the interviewees and their children. The intergenerational differences are important to this dissertation because they can demonstrate how consumption practices are shaped by social context.

**Between the interviewees and their parents**

When it comes to their parents’ consumption, the interviewees use such descriptions as ‘fundamentally different’ (Frank), ‘quite different’ (Carey), ‘big difference’ (Sage). The consumption patterns of their parents, according to the interviewees, can be illustrated by such a picture: frugal, usually saving as much as they can, never buying consumer goods beyond basic demands, devoted both financially and spiritually to children and difficult to change even when life is better-off.

One significant divergence between the interviewees and their parents lies in their judgement of ‘needs’. The interviewees recognize their ‘needs’ from various dimensions, including pleasure, comfort, relaxation, identity, and status-display; while their parents recognise their ‘needs’ mainly from the dimension of utility, and strictly limit their ‘needs’ within the scope of survival, such as eating, housing and clothing. Even though Phillip, the forty-year-old entrepreneur, is able to provide a better-off life for them, his parents are just as frugal as before. Another case is Carey’s parents. When they were alive, Carey’s parents were leading cadres in a government department but they spent money mainly on family and children. It can be inferred that their parents are so homogeneously frugal that their consumption patterns are hardly structured by income or social class. Compared with their parents, the interviewees generally prefer ‘the good ones’ or ‘the most expensive ones’.

Different from the consumer values of their parents, the interviewees do not deem frugality a virtue. Green’s mother is another case who strictly constrains desires and expenditure within basic demands. His father passed away over ten years ago, and his mother is still using the refrigerator purchased when his father was alive. The food and clothes given to her are usually left unused or get spoiled, as his mother insists that she does not ‘need’
these material goods. By contrast, Green normally buys what he ‘needs’ at any cost, which orientation he judges as more progressive.

‘My generation is relatively advanced, in terms of consumer values. And the society flourishes because of it [the consumer value]. Otherwise, no demand, no production.’

(Green, 35, male, native, head of design centre in a leading private company specialised in electronics and cars)

It can be seen that Green’s argument lies less in that frugality prevents one from enjoying pleasure and comfort but rather that it prevents the economy and the society from improving. Another example from him is the company he works for, which is a leading vehicle manufacturer in China. The computers for industrial design are supposed to be very expensive. However, his company only buys cheap ones, since they can perform similar functions, and is not concerned with the refinement of products. A preference for high-quality and refined material goods is thus implied in his explanation. Justification of the taste is also implied in the way Green makes sense of the generational differences – preference for quality and refined material goods does not only leads to a comfortable life but is also positive for social progress.

In line with frugality, the interviewees’ parents usually have the habit of saving money. In contrast to their parents, most of the interviewees do not use savings as the main financial strategy, as mentioned in chapter 7. The main reason is the differential social context which existed when they were economically active. As explained by Zack, the general manager in a medium-scaled state-holding company, parents developed the habit of saving as their salary was low and uncertain during the time when they were working. However, Zack is optimistic about his future and therefore sees it as unnecessary to keep a large amount of savings. Sage and John, who prefer to make investments or spend money on an enjoyable life, express similar confidence in themselves and the market. The interpretation is a reflection of the significant social transitions. In contemporary period, Chinese people, especially the metropolitan middle class, become more autonomous and have more sovereignty over their life, enabled by their increased cultural and economic capital.

Although parents are frugal in their own life, their saving is mostly spent on their children’s education and life, which is very common according to my interviewees.
Financial contribution is the main form of this commitment, which remains a significant feature of investment in children among the older generation in contemporary society.

However, as shown before, the younger interviewees tend to emphasize the ‘spiritual’ investment in children, e.g. love and care, rather than an affluent material life as their parents or the older interviewees tend to do. The different nature and extent of investment in children between the interviewees and their parents is also due to their different social contexts, as recognized by several interviewees. When the market was under-developed, the only way to accumulate wealth was saving and being frugal, in order to support the whole family. In today’s society, however, it is not difficult for middle class parents to support their children financially. The younger interviewees instead emphasize instruction and communication with children. Thus, the tradition of dedication to children is not discarded by the middle class, as can be seen from the commitment to children, but the nature and extent are altered in contemporary society. This generational difference is certainly enabled by the better-off living situations of the contemporary middle class. It, furthermore, shows the power of cultural capital - which has significantly increased among the contemporary middle class, with which parents are able to provide children with knowledge, attitudes, skills and even orientations that could lead to power and status in the current social system. This might be a more important factor for the emphasis on ‘spiritual’ investment.

Besides the main differences in frugality, savings and commitment to children, the pursuit of symbolic meanings in consumption also differentiates between the interviewees and their parents. Their parents are generally less keen on displaying status or pursuing identity. As to this difference, the interviewees are less confident, compared with the justification of the pursuit of pleasure and comfort. Instead of investing a lot in luxury goods as Patrick does, his parents invest more in healthy diets. The reason is that they do not have the pressure of using symbolic goods because of the social context in which they have been living, as explained by Patrick. In their time, they were not likely to earn much money and there were fewer consumer choices as well, so ‘they [parents] are used to a frugal life’. The provision of material goods, however, becomes multiple and diverse in contemporary society. His generation is thus able to choose freely, although, as a consequence, his material aspirations are expanded, as recognized by Patrick. In the sense of satisfying the ‘real demands’, Patrick agrees with his parents’ lifestyle, but he does not condemn his own lifestyle either.
The preference for convenience is another generational difference, with which the interviewees also show ambivalence. As part of the habit of frugality, their parents tend to save water and electricity, while the interviewees would rather pay more for convenience and comfort. Take Phillip’s parents as an example. The water after washing dishes is then used for watering flowers and mopping the floor. Some of the interviewees reflect upon this difference: is their parents’ consumption pattern friendly to the environment and truly ‘comfortable’? For instance, although he is used to air-conditioning, Green considers electric fans, which are preferred by his mother, greener and healthier. However, this green and ‘comfortable’ but time-consuming lifestyle is hardly the priority of the middle class, according to my interviews.

In order to cope with the differences, there are generally two schemes adopted by the interviewees. One is ‘counter-socialization’, to educate parents with new knowledge and let them agree with their consumer values. The other scheme is ‘let it be’, to allow for parents’ values, as long as they enjoy their life. Frank, John and Sage have tried to change their parents, as in their belief parents could live a better life if accepting their advice. However, Green found it difficult to change his mother’s consumption patterns, and is taking a more ‘respectful’ position, “as long as everyone is happy with their ‘philosophy’ [...] it's also interesting to have various types of consumers coexist”.

**Between the interviewees and their children**

Due to the different social contexts where they grew up, there are also differences in consumption between the interviewees and their own children. The interviewees generally respect consumption practices and values among their children. The main reason, as stressed by the interviewees, lies in the dramatic social changes. Therefore, the differentiation in consumption is generally conceived as normal and acceptable by the interviewees, although they are ambivalent sometimes.

The pursuit of comfort and pleasure is even more significant among their children and therefore their children seem more extravagant in expenditure. Although Charlie considers himself passionate about shopping, his son, a thirty-ish athlete, is even more impulsive in shopping and rarely cares about prices. Just as perceived by Michael, his children would consider him frugal when they grow up, although his expenditure is not a small amount.
The issue whether the Chinese consumers will be more extravagant in the future requires further research. However, the interpretation of the generational difference implies that the interviewees anticipate that the economy will keep growing and the society will keep marketised and commercialised.

Living in a more commercial and materialist society, the interviewees wonder if the new technologies and material goods are genuinely good for their children. Phillip, the 40-year-old entrepreneur, expresses his concern in this respect. His son, a primary school boy, is keen on electronic games, which Phillip also finds entertaining. However, compared with his childhood with fewer material goods but a more creative mind, the toys and games produced by modern industry are too ‘concrete’ which he thinks might damage the creativity of children. So he tried to take his son back to nature, but his son is not interested. As a parent, Phillip has no idea what to do, as ‘it’s difficult to influence him’. Thus, although the majority of interviewees claim to be satisfied with their consumption, there are still anxieties and ambivalence. The justification of taste and the satisfaction with consumption should be understood in relation to the concomitant anxieties and ambivalence, which will be explicated in chapter 9.

Through analysis of the intergenerational differences, it is clearly seen how consumption practices and orientations are shaped by different social contexts, which is a main concern of this dissertation. Individual consumption patterns undergo changes in the face of transitions in social and economic conditions. However, they might not be easily altered in a short time in correspondence with social changes. From the discussion about these differences, the interviewees have also reflected upon their own consumption. Their pursuit of pleasure, comfort, identity and status-display as well as their financial strategies can generally be justified, although there are concomitant anxieties and ambivalence. The power of economic and cultural capital is particularly implied in their interpretations.

**Giving gifts**

Gift giving in Chinese society is closely associated with social ties. It does not make sense to talk about what gifts you give away in general. There are various social conventions embedded, depending on to whom you give gifts. Taste and social status of the gift-recipient play important roles in the choice of gifts. The meanings of goods are significant in gift reciprocity, some of which intersect with the particular social situations of China.
Giving and receiving gifts, from the perspective of inter-personal relations, have long been recognized as engendering social cohesion and feelings of community support (Belk 1979, Cheal 1987, Mauss 1925, cited in Belk, 2001). In choosing gifts for various social relations, five interviewees (mostly women) particularly mention the rule of ‘the closer, the more expensive’. The gifts which are expensive and entail most thought usually go to family members, such as children, parents and partners and good friends. This pattern of gift-giving again refers to the model of ‘differential mode of association’ by Fei (1992). It has been shown that the interviewees generally send parents household durables, food and clothes on festivals or their birthdays or pay for their tourism. Besides, luxury goods and services are also used to convey feelings for their partners. Diana once gave her boyfriend a watch costing 2,000yuan on his birthday, and has received similarly priced gifts from her boyfriend as well. Restricted by their purchasing power, they only give such expensive gifts to each other on special days. For more affluent interviewees, expensive gifts are sent to partners more frequently. The gifts between Tom and his wife are usually luxury goods. He has given her a Cartier watch on their anniversary, and his wife has given him on his birthday a Louis Vuitton briefcase, which costs 10,000yuan. Although his family has been able to afford these luxury goods for a long time, he did not start to use them until recently and he would not buy them for himself unless he receives them as gifts.

The expensive gifts circulated among family members could also be understood from the relationship between objects and persons, which is, however, often neglected by existing study of Chinese consumers. From the stance of material culture, routinized gift-giving could function as acquiring luxuries (as gifts) without suffering the concomitant guilt for self-indulgence that might accrue from buying these same things for oneself (Belk, 1993). This theory could partly explain the cases of exchanging luxury gifts, in addition to engendering social cohesion.

It can be seen that the value of material goods and the emotions carried by them are important in gift reciprocity between family members and close friends. However, in the broader sense of gift-giving, the taste of both the gift-receivers and the gift-senders are also a primary consideration. Lily gives gifts depending on the characteristics of the recipient. For examples, she selected skin-care for women and clothes for children. Gifts from Hans reflect his own tastes: he likes books, so the most usual gifts sent by him are also books, although these gifts more often go to people who also like books or to children.
Compared with the gifts for family members and friends, giving gifts to work mates is more complex. According to the interviewees, the choice of gift should be consistent with the social status and the tastes of the recipient. On the other hand, the price of the gift might indicate the motivation for this practice. The experience of Charlie, the 57-year-old civil servant and state-level referee, can help to understand gift-giving among work mates.

Charlie: [...] But for instance, the senior officer of the national team...it’s very hard to give him gifts. The general referee of the national team is in contact with so many [pause] [material goods] in the world [pause] the goods displayed on the shelf [pause] Gosh, are much higher grade than mine. (He) appreciates very high-grade goods, and won’t have a look at it at all if given something ordinary.

Int.: What do you do then?
Charlie: You can only give the particular goods from your hometown.
Int.: Superior and expensive?
Charlie: Yes [...] I haven’t given him very expensive goods. I don’t beg others to do something, so why would I give away expensive gifts? But if you like [pause], I will give something good and valuable to friends. By ‘valuable’ I mean appreciating value and meaning. (Charlie, 57, male, migrant, state-level referee & middle-ranked civil servant)

The tensions involved in gift reciprocity in the workplace can be described as follows. On the one hand, colleagues and clients of high social status can hardly be impressed with ordinary gifts. On the other hand, because of the implications and motivations embodied in this practice, one needs to be careful when sending expensive gifts. The experience of Flora, the 27-year-old consultant, is that ‘[The gift between colleagues] can’t be too cheap or too expensive, far away from luxury goods [...] something around one or two hundred yuan.’ Although the claim from most interviewees that they have not sent very expensive gifts to bosses or clients is doubtful, it is clear that giving expensive gifts sometimes indicates asking for favours, which shows how the social meanings of material goods is evolving in the particular situation of China.

Besides enhancing relationship and asking for favours, the meaning of gifts in Chinese society is also related to social conventions. For example, according to Charlie, it is polite to bring a gift, but not necessarily an expensive one, when a person makes a visit or comes back from a trip.
It can be concluded that expensive and luxury gifts often go to family members and close friends, and the social status and tastes of the gift-recipient should be represented in gift reciprocity among the more distant social ties. The meanings of gifts focus more on conveying emotions and greetings or the request of favours, and the latter meaning intersects with the particular social conventions in China. Thus, consistent with existing literature (Belk, 2001; Wong and Ahuvia, 1998), giving gifts in China also aims at strengthening of social ties and building feelings of community support. However, based on my findings, gift circulation among the middle class in Beijing tends to be less related to conspicuous consumption, challenging the argument that the population in Confucian culture tends to give luxury gifts for status ostentation (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998:13). In addition to implications for material culture, the choice of gifts also shows how the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort works in the Chinese context, in a way that the middle class in Beijing encourage pursuit of pleasure and comfort in their family and friends.

**Consumption and social interactions**

Social interactions - with whom a person discusses consumption, with whom a person goes shopping and how a person is perceived by other people - are an important component, together with practices and interpretations, in understanding people’s everyday life. This section will examine the extent to which social interactions, with family members, friends and colleagues, shape consumer choices and tastes.

It is found that family members, former classmates, friends and colleagues are the main people with whom the interviewees often discuss shopping and consumption. These people generally share some common features with themselves, in terms of gender, age, taste and purchasing power. Besides face to face interactions, the online community is a new space for young people to share experiences of consumption. Frank often consults with people online about the purchase and use of digital products. Although most of his ‘online consultants’ are strangers, Frank trusts their advice as ‘they are really qualified’.

A dual relationship between consumption and social relations is thus detected. On the one hand, consumption is shaped by social relations, or in Simmel’s terms ‘interaction forms the participants’, for the interviewees tend to go shopping with people from similar
backgrounds. On the other hand, social relations are also constructed by consumption, in which process the interviewees are close to the people who share tastes with them and would be distant from those who do not. This process is significant in the creation of social division by taste, which will be demonstrated in the next chapter. Another reflection of this process is the finding that consumption, because it might imply one’s social status, is sometimes a taboo during interactions with people who are less well-off. The interviewees avoid talking about what they buy and how much they spend with people who have a lower income, due to the risks of offence and ostentation. Charlie’s cousins earn only several hundred yuan a month and live a more frugal life, and Charlie never tells them what he buys, ‘I don’t publicize (my consumption) or show off, as there is a gap after all’. Instead, he usually discusses consumption with friends and colleagues, most of whom are younger, earn a higher salary and also work in sports.

It is thus indicated that rich people try to avoid the less well-off living situations of other people in case such contact causes them guilt or ambivalence in their pursuit of pleasure and comfort. Rather than help relatives or friends or reduce their expenditure, the interviewees prefer to make their consumption appear ‘low-key’ to minimize pressure on other people. This attitude reminds us of the limited commitments to relatives and friends as illustrated above. It helps us to understand the consumption patterns of the middle class. The pursuit of personal pleasure and comfort does not need to be compensated for by sufficient commitments to other people, but is legitimate in itself. This justification will be explained more fully in chapter 9.

According to the interviews, colleagues are the people with whom the interviewees most frequently talk about consumption and family members are the people with whom the social interactions have most substantial impact on consumer decisions. The differential outcomes of the interactions in essence reflect the tension between individuality and universality of taste, which also implies the intersection between the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort and traditional values.

**Interactions with colleagues**

Frequent interaction with colleagues is particularly significant among the female interviewees. First, consumption is one of the most popular topics of conversation in offices, including choices of goods and shopping information. Furthermore, colleagues are
the companions with whom the interviewees often go shopping. The reason why colleagues have more common language in consumption, according to Flora, is ‘our earnings are at a similar level, and we have similar consumer orientation and go to similar shopping locations’. By contrast, the male interviewees are generally less keen on consumption conversations in the workplace, as they think personal consumption should only be shared among close friends and family members. Frank is an exceptional case who often talks about his consumption of digital products with colleagues, as they, as IT professionals, share his interest in digital products.

Although it is salient that the interviewees organise and understand their consumption through interacting with colleagues, the extent to which social interactions at work shape their consumption is varied. Gender is a factor as revealed above. The judgement of taste, i.e. how to deal with the tension between individuality and universality of taste, is an underlying factor to explain the variations. The interviewees would like to pursue pleasure and comfort through their consumption, on the one hand; on the other hand, they want to conform to the shared understanding of taste in society, to avoid anxiety. Where to draw the line between individuality and universality, however, varies among them.

It turns out that most of the interviewees place emphasis on the individuality of taste during interactions in public. Working in a real-estate enterprise, Sage often exchanges views on property investment with his colleagues but his strategy, which is rather bold, is not approved by them. Sage, however, insists on it and enjoys the pressure.

*Sage: They don't agree with my style of investment, thinking that my desire for rapidly expanding the fixed assets is too strong [...] Their analysis [strategy] is more realistic and objective.*

Int.: How do you cope with the disagreements?

*Sage: For me, my own thoughts are firm, and I consider their opinions as kind suggestions which [however] won't have influence on me. I want to turn it into initiative pressure which pushes me forward, rather than being passive.*

(Sage, 31, male, migrant, department manager in a leading real-estate private company)

The reason their consumption is less likely to be altered by different experiences in shopping among colleagues, according to the interviewees, is that the purchase and use of material goods is an ‘individual’ matter. As mentioned above, several male interviewees do
not often talk about shopping at work. For instance, Michael considers ‘consumption\(^1\) is a private matter’, so there are not many comments nor much advice from his friends or colleagues. Although there are different tastes among Flora’s colleagues, they respect each other’s choices, as ‘consumption\(^2\) is my personal matter’.

Even if a person more often goes shopping with friends, there remains relative independence between them. Lily often goes shopping with female former classmates, who are more impulsive in clothes shopping. However, Lily is less passionate for clothes, and thus in their eyes Lily is more ‘man-like’. But they do not interfere with each other’s tastes and habits in consumption.

There are even more extreme cases, who are not only insistent on their own tastes but are actually the ‘role-models’ in interacting with friends and colleagues. Carey is the source of information on where to eat and is the person in charge of ordering when socialising with friends at restaurants\(^3\). Frank is another typical case in this respect. As an expert on digital products, he is not only consulted by colleagues and friends, but is able to alter their decisions. For instance, a colleague wanted to buy a DSLR camera (Digital Single Lense Reflex), but was eventually persuaded by Frank to buy an ordinary digital camera, as Frank thought it was the most appropriate for him. The impact of the ‘role-models’ reflects their higher cultural and economic capital of the middle class, which enables them to own more expertise and have more experience of using material goods and services.

Although the majority of the interviewees embrace the individuality of their tastes, they are also sensitive to universality to achieve coherence with society, particularly for those working in government-related institutions. Bella, the 29-year-old civil servant, is insistent on her own taste, but adopts some strategies to keep coherence with colleagues. She likes art and books, while most of her colleagues who are older than her are more interested in consumption for children and clothes shopping; so she avoids talking about her cultural consumption with colleagues, ‘I’m a person who knows how to disguise myself [laughs], because you should choose [suitable] topics according to whom you’re with.’

\(^1\) Refers to using and purchasing of material goods and services.

\(^2\) Refers to using and purchasing of material goods and services.

\(^3\) People often share dishes rather than order and eat one’s own dishes in Chinese cuisine.
There are also cases, although only a few, who place emphasis on the universality of tastes. Olive, the 38-year-old PR executive, is a typical example who has made adjustments to her tastes at her new workplace. She used to be into fashion when working at a TV station, but became ‘rustic’ after getting a new job at a food company, where people rarely dress up or use luxurious or high status consumer goods. As stressed by her, ‘I care about people’s judgements, as I don’t want to stand out’. Julia, the 31-year-old HR professional, is also inclined towards universality of taste but is different from Olive in motivation. She is happy to accept advice from colleagues and considers herself an ‘easy-influenced’ person. Julia bought her family insurance on advice from colleagues, chooses clothes after discussion with colleagues and also goes shopping online frequently under the influence of other colleagues. She finds suggestions from others useful.

Nevertheless, individuality in the judgement of taste is significant among the interviewees, as implied in the social interactions in the ‘public’ sphere. The importance of this finding lies in its implications for consumer orientation. As reviewed in chapter 4, the ‘personal orientations’, i.e. pursuing pleasure, comfort, self-rewards and self-identity, as opposed to the aim of impressing others, have been elevated in existing studies of luxury consumption and Chinese consumers (e.g. Tsai, 2005; Zhu 2006). My dissertation has confirmed and expanded this argument, by affirming that ‘personal orientations’ are celebrated by the Chinese middle class in Beijing especially during social interactions in public. The reason might lie in the lack of a collective culture among the middle class and the fragmentation of taste as influenced by the market and the media. Therefore, my dissertation has also revealed the tension between self identity and social identity, which, as summarised by Wang (2006), shapes the consumption patterns of the middle class.

**Interactions with family members**

Compared with interactions with colleagues and friends, interactions with family members turn out to have more influence on the expenditure and tastes of the interviewees. Specifically, interactions with parents, usually during childhood, shape tastes and material aspirations. Furthermore, interactions with partners alter consumer decisions, as they often share material goods and services.

As explained by Hazel, the fifty-ish professor, she developed her preference for high-quality goods when very young from her parents, who also prefer quality rather than
quantity in the purchase of material goods. Similarly, Grey, the 35-year-old professional in
the luxury industry, ascribes his moderate aspiration for material goods to education by
parents in his childhood, ‘the influence of parents is more ... firm than those of later life
[social status and living in Beijing].’

However, tastes could hardly be influenced by parents when the interviewees became
adults. By contrast, partners, who share household expenditure and sometimes are
shopping companions, often intervene in their consumer decisions and could even change
their tastes and consumption patterns. Patrick, the 27-year-old IT professional, develops his
interest in designer goods because his wife often asks him to bring these goods from
abroad. Hans, the senior media professional, although not keen on fashion, develops his
aesthetics on fashion under the influences of his wife and brother.

‘It's easy to tell whether a person dresses stylish or countrified [...] I don't read fashion
magazines [...] my brother is working in fashion abroad and has brought me a lot of
clothes, and my wife likes it [fashion]. I haven't done research on it but I can sense
[fashion].’ (Hans, 40, male, migrant, deputy director in a leading state-owned news agency)

Moreover, if it is consumption for the whole family, the interviewees sometimes have to
negotiate with partners which might change their decisions. A family trip is a typical
example. When Zack, Grey and Michael go on holiday with their wife and children, they
need to agree on the travelling plans and sometimes have to compromise their own
interests. Because the interviewees and their partners tend to have joint control over their
income, as addressed in chapter 7, large amounts of expenditure need negotiation. Lincoln
and Frank have to seek the agreement of their wives before buying digital goods, and as a
result Lincoln has reduced his expenditure in this field since getting married.

It is hence shown that universality of taste is emphasized in the interactions with family
members. Traditional values of family commitment are embodied in this process, since the
interviewees would like to reconcile their personal tastes to achieving family cohesion. The
emphasis on universality of taste in family life, combined with the emphasis on
individuality of taste in ‘public’ life, gives a more complete picture of the middle class
consumers in Beijing. The pursuit of pleasure, comfort or self-identity, tempered by
traditional values, is significant in their consumption patterns.
This section has elucidated how tastes and everyday consumption among the interviewees are shaped by interacting with others. The extent to which their consumption is influenced is found to be differentiated in the interactions in the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ spheres. Although the interviewees talk about consumption with colleagues frequently, the impact of the interactions is limited, mainly because they emphasize more individuality in the judgement of taste. On the contrary, their tastes and consumer decisions are shaped by family members, e.g. parents and partners, to a large extent, mainly because they pay more attention to family harmony. Through the analysis of social interactions, it can be detected how the personal or self-referential orientations, intersect with the more traditional value of family commitment.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how the purchase and use of material goods is shaped by social conventions, social relations and social contexts. On the one hand, meanings of goods and the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort are implied in consumption patterns. The interviewees use material goods to fulfil family commitments and to enhance social ties. Although the purpose of status-display in consumption is indicated in a few cases, the personal orientations, pursuit of pleasure, comfort and self-identity, are more significant, as especially implied in the interactions with colleagues and friends. Justifications of their tastes are especially found through comparisons with parents. On the other hand, the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort is tempered by traditional values. The interviewees invest extensively in their children and support their parents with a strong sense of obligation. Expensive gifts are generally given to close relations to convey emotions or to share pleasure and comfort. Although the interviewees stress individuality in their tastes, they are more likely to temper their personal tastes when interacting with family members. Therefore, the interviewees are also concerned with pleasure and comfort of their family and close friends. It is shown again that the traditional values, especially on family commitment, play important roles in the consumption patterns of the middle class. Interviews consequently revealed how the consumer orientation operates in particular situations in China. This argument will be elaborated further in discussion of the tastes and material aspirations of the middle class in Chapter 9.
Chapter 9 Taste and material aspiration

Introduction

Having examined everyday consumption and how social conventions frame consumption practices, this dissertation will proceed to two other major themes in the sociology of consumption: the shaping of taste and the nature and extent of material aspirations. These two themes are concerned with the appreciation and appropriation of material goods, from which analysis of the role of consumer orientations can be further developed. This chapter aims to formulate how the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort works in China, in relation to aesthetic and moral justifications.

The shaping of taste

The articulation of the tastes of the middle class is structured by the theory of three dimensions of taste (Warde, 2008), as reviewed in chapter 2. In terms of the distribution of taste, the differentiation of preferences in consumption among the interviewees will be described. The judgment of taste examines the shaping of taste from the perspective of social interactions, relating taste to social distinction. It will therefore shed light on how social relations are constructed by consumption, which received preliminary discussion in chapter 8. The justification of taste, which, based on the judgment of taste, examines how people come to feel confident with their taste. It is the most important dimension for this dissertation, because of its implications for consumer orientation.

The distribution of taste

When asked, the preferred consumption of the interviewees includes various material goods and services, and the interviewees often most favour two or more consumption practices. However, three types of consumption are more significant and shared by most people, namely cultural goods and events, refined or high-quality but less conspicuous goods, and activities for relaxation and leisure.

Large investment in cultural goods and events is a distinguishing feature of the consumption patterns of the middle class in Beijing, compared with the lower class. First of all, the preference for cultural goods and events, especially reading, can be justified,
which is part of the reason for the high expenditure on them. The interviewees who like reading often buy books regardless of price and their family usually has no complaint about the time and money spent on reading. Secondly, the cultural goods and services used by the interviewees are quite diverse, including books, discs, magazines, newspapers, and going to galleries, cinema, concerts and various performances. The diverse interests in cultural consumption can also explain the high expenditure. Thirdly, the interviewees working in cultural industries are more enthusiastic about cultural consumption. Hans and Lily, both working in news agencies, are two cases keen on reading and they take books as their priority for consumption. Hans, the 40-year-old senior director, spends several thousand yuan per month on books and goes to bookshops frequently, although he is very busy with work. Lily, the 30-year-old department director, spends less than Hans on books but often goes to bookshops as well. According to Hans and Lily, the most treasured material goods are books and they often give books as gifts.

The salience of the taste for legitimate culture reflects the overall high cultural capital of the interviewees. Among them, the education level is generally university (or equivalent). However, the hierarchies of cultural domains are found insignificant in taste. Although some of them often engage in ‘high culture’, e.g. theatre, opera and going to galleries, there is no clear sign that the interviewees, even those who go to galleries and museums more frequently, reject ‘popular culture’, e.g. TV programs, Hollywood movies and popular music. This consumption pattern is, to a certain extent, consistent with the ‘omnivore taste’ among the Western middle class (Peterson and Kern, 1996). It is, however, also related to the absence of ‘the collective culture’ among the Chinese middle class because of its young age, as argued by Wang (2006).

As addressed in chapter 8, a significant generational difference is that, while their parents often choose cheap and basic consumer goods, the interviewees prefer high quality and more expensive items. In terms of taste, a great number of interviewees express their inclination for material goods and services that are refined, branded, of high quality, or even from ‘designer’ manufacturers.

On the one hand, income plays a crucial role in differentiating shopping frequency and expenditure. On the other hand, the tastes of the interviewees point at a similar pattern, despite differences in purchasing power. Carey, the 48-year-old business-owner, purchases most of her shoes, clothes, accessories and perfume at a luxury store or overseas. Although
with a lower income, Flora (27, consultant) and Julia (31, HR director) also stress the quality of goods and go shopping selectively, exercising the ‘combination strategy’ mentioned in chapter 7, to match their purchasing power. Even Patrick extended his taste from computers to luxury goods after getting a well-paid job as luxury goods bring him pleasure and comfort and display his social status.

Although the interviewees appreciate refined and quality goods, they generally avoid ostentation. Olive, the affluent PR executive, emphasizes her preference for inconspicuous brands, although these brands are not necessarily cheap. The handbag she carries to work is worth 7,000 yuan, but with a small logo and from an obscure designer. According to Olive, the reason is to maintain a good relationship with colleagues. Laura, the 27-year-old sales manager, has similar taste to Olive, but implies a different motivation: ‘[…] I like low-key goods […] I would prefer those that don’t stand out, not branded but which are comfortable to use and within my purchasing power.’

It can be seen from the taste of the interviewees for refined or high-quality goods that their consumption aims more at pleasure and comfort, less at expressing a message to others, although the latter dimension is also concerned by a small amount of interviewees.

The activities for relaxation and leisure preferred by the interviewees in their spare time include tourism, hiking, going to the gym, going to massage, going to tea houses, going to clubs and playing poker and, in some cases, shopping itself being a leisure activity.

Going on holiday at home and abroad is generally the favourite area of consumption among the interviewees during their vacations, and most of them prefer self-guided tours. Younger people prefer hiking, camping and ‘back-packing’ which involves planning and travelling around by oneself rather than with agencies, aiming at more stimulation. By contrast, older people or people who travel with family prefer leisure holidays and driving trips for relaxation.

Holidays and leisure trips usually cost a great amount of money, so income again plays an important role in differentiating the patterns of travelling. However, enthusiasm about tourism is similar among the interviewees. The more affluent interviewees often go on holiday overseas and spend more money. For example John,
‘The most recent time we went to Hawaii was in 2005. The expenditure was several tens of thousand yuan. We [my wife and I] stayed for 8 days, travelled to two islands, rented a car and lived in very good accommodation’. (John, 40, male, migrant, Chief Procurement Officer for China District in an MNC in chemicals)

Bella, the civil servant of 29 with a lower income, also goes on trips during her annual leave, which is about one month, in a ‘frugal way’ as stressed by her. Her expenditure on tourism every year is approximately 10,000 yuan.

The above analysis has shown the distribution of taste among the interviewees. Although income differentiates the frequency and expenditure, the interviewees are generally keen on cultural consumption, high-quality goods and tourism. Besides, gender and age play important roles in differentiating tastes. Window shopping or shopping as a leisure activity is usually favoured by women, but rarely by men. The preferences for high-technical products and services, for example digital products and online shopping, are more correlated with young people; while the preference for health and fitness related activities, like diet therapy and going to massage, are more common with older people. Despite the variations, an orientation to personal pleasure and comfort is implied in the tastes of the interviewees.

The judgment of taste

Judgment of taste was mentioned in chapter 8 in social interactions, in terms of how the interviewees draw the line between universality and individuality of tastes. This section will focus on how they make judgments on other people’s taste and how the judgment of taste creates social divisions.

First of all, the interviewees generally distinguish their taste from popular trends and vulgar taste. The older interviewees who are generally aged above 40, like Carey, Hazel and Zoë, tend to reject fashion and insist on their own aesthetic and taste. Hazel’s preference for quality goods is appreciated by some of her colleagues but judged as bad taste by her relatives in her hometown, ‘they think I’m careless with my appearance [bu jiang jiu].’ In contrast to Hazel, her relatives would prefer expensive fur coats and branded clothes rather than high-quality clothes and food. However, Hazel does not agree with the judgment of her relatives and is confident in her own taste. Zoë is also confident in her
own aesthetic judgment, by referring to how other people think of her taste in a positive way.

‘I have no brand recognition [...] When people look at what I'm wearing, they will feel [pause], at first, my clothes are very high-grade, secondly they are branded clothes, but actually my clothes often cost only several tens of yuan’. (Zoë, 40, female, migrant, writer and researcher in a state-owned research institute)

By comparison, the younger interviewees do not resist fashion, but neither do they consider themselves to be conforming to popular trends. Flora, the 27-year-old consultant in a foreign company, likes reading fashion magazines, but is not attracted by the ‘well-known brands’. For example, she does not like Tissot and Patek Philippe¹ which are often recommended by the media, but prefers Movado² which is less well-known. Another typical example is the judgment of the ‘petty bourgeoisie (xiao zi) taste’³ made by Diana, the native professional at a similar age, which might show that the middle class in Beijing are more reflective in tastes and therefore do not like to follow popular trends blindly. This ‘petty bourgeoisie taste’ is associated with the lifestyle of the Western middle class and emphasizes aesthetics and manners achieved by using material goods. It used to be celebrated among the middle class, but has been recognized as artificial and vulgar during recent years. Against this background, Diana made this judgment of one of her colleagues’ taste:

‘There is one of my colleagues who thinks himself a person of good taste [pause]. Let me organize my thoughts first. He often picks places that agree with ‘petty bourgeoisie taste’ when eating out and will find many special and odd restaurants. He defines it as [good] taste and enjoys this process. But we find it strives for a certain style and culture, as if pursuing a feeling for its own sake.’ (Diana, 28, female, native, business and administration manager in a foreign stock company)

In contrast, Diana stresses aesthetic experiences rather than material goods per se, ‘[…] but I think taste is more internal’, ‘your heart will turn the relatively crude environment into a glorious one’. This judgment further illustrates the preference for refined and high-quality

¹ Both of them are watch brands.
² A watch brand.
³ This term is different from that in the context of Britain. It generally represents a western, more aesthetic lifestyle, without necessarily referring to the hierarchies of taste. Reference: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xiaozi [Assessed in May, 2010].
but less ostentatious goods among the interviewees. Furthermore, in making judgment on other people’s taste, many interviewees define conspicuous consumption as vulgar taste. On the basis of her taste, Olive makes judgment on several negative cases.

‘[I] won’t use a handbag with a famous and big logo which is too conspicuous. But I find girls in other public relations companies often carry handbags with big logos.’ (Olive, 38, female, migrant, PR executive in a large state-holding company handling food)

Less affluent people, who cannot afford designer products, would rather use ordinary material goods, as long as they are comfortable and beautiful, than fake ‘designer’ goods. This judgment is salient when Julia talks about one of her colleagues, who does prefer fake ‘designer’ products:

‘[…] I'd carry a cotton bag rather than a fake LV. And carrying a cotton bag nowadays is also … called ‘style’. At least I haven't bought fake products. It's unnecessary to buy a fake one in order to show off.’ (Julia, 31, female, native, human resource director in a foreign real-estate company)

Thus, the interviewees generally agree that good taste relies on both economic and cultural capital. In particular, they stress the roles that aesthetics and manners play in the making of good taste. Actually, there is often criticism in public of rich people who are ill-educated and know less about aesthetics. This judgment is brought forward by Bella,

‘[…] depends on who is using them [luxury goods]. If you really care about them but your temperament doesn't match, a handbag at 5,000yuan is just like one at 100yuan.’ ‘They [the nouveaux- riches] want to show off, which is completely meaningless. It [a luxury item] doesn't succeed in displaying your status, in my opinion,’ (Bella, 29, female, migrant, civil servant, central government)

By contrast, Bella is confident in her preference for cultural goods and events. Julia also agrees that personal wealth does not necessarily lead to good taste and further argues that one’s taste relies on cultural capital, ‘from the family and is an internal thing’.

Through the judgment of taste, social divisions are created, as implied in the above analysis. The interviewees generally distinguish themselves from those keen on
conspicuous consumption and from those who follow fashion blindly. On the other hand, divisions within the middle class are also revealed. The interviewees also differentiate themselves from super rich people by referring to the latter’s extravagant expenditure. Although some of the interviewees (8 out of 30) mention that certain of their expenditure or their general consumption patterns have been judged ‘extravagant’ by other people, they consider themselves less extravagant if compared with the super rich. A few female interviewees find that people from affluent family backgrounds, either with rich parents or a rich husband, are more lavish compared to those who have accumulated wealth by themselves. It is thus elucidated how social relations (if a person is close to or distant from another person) are constructed by consumption.

From the analysis of the judgement of taste, it is implied that the interviewees tend to be confident in their taste. According to these accounts, the interviewees resist following popular trends blindly and are not easily influenced by other people. Although there are people wealthier and more powerful, the interviewees do not resent them and are confident in their own taste. This finding can be explained by the emphasis on the individuality of taste during interactions with colleagues and friends, as shown in chapter 8. The confidence of taste will be further illustrated by their justifications of taste.

**The justification of taste**

As reviewed in chapter 2, justifications have been ‘absent’ in the Chinese context, where their place was occupied by morally enriched prescriptions in accordance with social roles. However, this dissertation argues that in the context of globalization there are some social changes and people have to justify to themselves and other people their choices and preferences in consumption. This section will demonstrate how the interpretation of their consumption practice reveals particular modes of justification. Because of the particularities of Chinese culture, moral justification might be required in addition to aesthetic justification. The justification of taste will be analyzed with regard to aesthetic justification and moral justification. They are also the main dimensions of justification employed by the existing literature (as discussed in chapter 2). This section aims to formulate how the consumer orientation operates in China in relation to justification of taste.

**The aesthetic justification**
The interviewees, when they interpret their own taste, emphasize dimensions of pleasure, comfort, relaxation, self-reward, status-display, and identity. It is common that more than one dimension is pursued in anyone’s consumption pattern. Among them, the aesthetic of pleasure and the aesthetic of comfort (if relaxation can be understood as a form of comfort) are most significant. *Eight* out of thirty informants explicitly use the term ‘pleasure’, ‘fun’ or ‘happy’ when explaining why they prefer certain activities or material goods, for instance ‘*they bring pleasure to your life*’ and ‘*it makes my kids happy*’. In addition, *ten* interviewees interpret their tastes implicitly as pleasure-seeking, such as Diana and Bella who seek aesthetic pleasure from certain material goods and going to galleries, and Grey, White and Bella who celebrate experiencing pleasure in tourism. Furthermore, *no* informants condemn the pursuit of pleasure in consumption. Among the *eighteen* informants with an orientation to personal pleasure, many also pursue a comfortable life in the use of high-quality material goods or various services, like eating out and online shopping. For example, ‘*I consider it [buying a car] an issue of convenience, related to improving the quality of life*’ (Charlie), ‘*they [digital products] bring convenience to life*’ (Frank). In addition, for *ten* other interviewees, comfort and wants satisfaction are the main motives of their consumption. Only *two* interviewees (Patrick and Joyce) claim that their main concern is status-display or social identity, though these are also subsidiary motives for *five* other interviewees. Thus, differentiated patterns of consumption are uncovered in the interview data.

The analysis of the aesthetic justification is framed by the typology of gratification which is developed from a study of eating-out practices in Britain (Warde and Martens, 2000). It is suggested that there are four realms of gratification, namely the sensual, the instrumental, the contemplative and the social (ibid: 186). See table 9.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of gratification</th>
<th>Sensual</th>
<th>Instrumental</th>
<th>Contemplative</th>
<th>Social</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low intensity</strong></td>
<td>Pleasure</td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High intensity</strong></td>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>Appreciation</td>
<td>Mutuality</td>
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As interpreted by Warde and Marten (ibid: 186), pleasure and joy includes those bodily pleasures which Campbell (1987) associates with traditional hedonism. Sensual pleasures can be generally obtained by the eighteen interviewees who display an explicit or an implicit orientation to personal pleasure. Experiencing pleasure can be gained in tourism, pleasure and stimulation can be obtained by using digital products or driving, and aesthetic pleasure can be acquired through using perfume or dressing in beautiful clothes. Sensual pleasure is very significant in the case of Flora, who has collected a variety of perfumes and often uses them:

‘I like perfume because the bottle of perfume is normally beautiful, and I’m delighted to have a lovely fragrance. It puts me in a good mood to spray it on before leaving home ... just that kind of pleasure’. (Flora, 27, female, migrant, consultant in a leading consulting MNC)

John demonstrates the multiple motivations of pursuing both sensual pleasure and comfort in his consumption. The forty-ish CPO likes overseas holidays and driving trips to remote places:

‘I like travelling by self-driving in China [...] I drove to Xinjiang, which is 12,000 kilometres for a round trip ... I stay for days if I see anything interesting ... there is no plan for my trips.’

‘Overseas, I’ve been to Hawaii, Alaska, Europe and Japan [...] My wife and I have been to Hawaii three times. When we plan to go, we don't have to save on other expenditure to pay for it and we go whenever we want. During the holiday, I'll follow my consistent aim that I must live in the best place and eat the best food’ (John, 40, male, migrant, Chief Procurement Officer for China District in an MNC in chemicals)

According to Scitovsky (1976), the satisfaction of wants eliminates a discomfort whose initial presence is a necessary condition of pleasure. This rationale is confirmed by John’s taste. He prefers fine accommodation and food on his trips. Furthermore, it can be inferred from the interview data that most people, if money and time allowed, would not be satisfied by continuous comfort, but also go for leisure and cultural consumption and even more energy-consuming self-guided tours and sports. The reason is that pleasure generated by stimulation at the cost of creating temporary strain is ‘more likely to survive the competition with comfort’, as explained by Scitovsky (ibid: 78).
Instrumental gratification is the world of achievement, with regard to monetary value of consumer goods and self-improvement: ‘of putting means to valued ends … of securing material advancement … or making successful presentations of self’ (Warde and Martens, 2000: 186). The ten interviewees who take comfort as the main pursuit fall into this category, because comfort is associated with satisfaction of physical and mental demands. Reading is a quintessential taste which yields instrumental gratification. Hans, Bella and Lily exhibit great enthusiasm for reading, from which they could gain knowledge and enhancement of themselves. Sense of achievement, the high intensity of instrumental gratification, is significant among several interviewees in their consumption. As mentioned in chapter 8, Tom and Sage seek sense of achievement from considerable financial contribution to their parents.

In Patrick’s consumption, both the high and low intensity of instrumental pleasure are displayed. The 27-year-old IT professional has a passion for luxury goods.

‘It [owning luxury goods] is pleasure for me. It makes you happy to own premium items of fine quality when one is rich. For example, a handbag from Hermes or Ferragamo or a watch from Blancpain, I think they’re certainly worth the price, and they are gained by my hard work. If I could buy a big house now, it would be great pleasure to me.’ (Patrick, 27, male, migrant, team leader in a leading IT MNC)

Although status-display and identity-claims are involved, the underlying reason for Patrick’s consumption is pleasure and comfort derived from using these material goods, which are also tempered with a sense of achievement from work. That is why he considers the expensive goods worth the price. Furthermore, Patrick considers that the pleasure derived from dreaming and desire is greater than from the real material goods:

‘Money and material goods won’t give you pleasant sensations. When you are poor, it is happy to imagine getting rich, as the pleasant sensation is not based on real material goods but on the psychological comparison. It is … the sense of superiority by comparison with others and this sense of superiority exists in the imagination.’
This quotation implies that the pleasure constructed by imagination is the underlying ‘satisfaction’, which is close to Campbell’s ‘modern hedonism’ (1987), or ‘contemplative gratification’ suggested by Warde and Martens (2000: 186).

Contemplative gratification subsumes experiences like dreaming and fantasy, aesthetic appreciation and intellectual reflection, all of which offer some rewards (Warde and Martens, 2000: 186). Entertainment, the low density of contemplative pleasure, is obtained by most of the interviewees through, for example, listening to music, window shopping and watching films. Intellectual appreciation, the high density of contemplative pleasure, however, is limited to a few interviewees who show extraordinary passion about certain practices. Frank, Flora and Carey have developed their hobbies to expert level. Frank likes digital products and is often consulted by other people. He is especially proud of his ‘homework’, collecting and analyzing sufficient information before purchasing digital goods. Flora likes hunting for novel restaurants and has formed her own opinions on food, environment and service by reflecting on her frequent eating-out. If patronizing a special restaurant, she not only collects information in advance but writes up reviews afterwards. It is also demonstrated by these cases that the interviewees are often not satisfied with merely owning material goods, but are more interested in appreciation and appropriation of them. The capacity of being a connoisseur is also a reflection of their higher cultural and economic capital.

Dreaming and fantasy play important roles in yielding contemplative gratification, in the sense of constructing pleasure from even mundane activities. This skill is considered to be crucial in modern hedonism which, as argued by Campbell (1987), is the underlying dynamic of the consumer culture in modern society. This dissertation is not going to generalise the theory of ‘modern hedonism’ to all Chinese consumers, nor does it attribute all the practices of ‘seeking pleasure from imagination’ to ‘modern hedonism’. However, the findings on contemplative gratification reveal new consumption patterns and point out important new forms of justification among the interviewees. In their interpretations of their taste, some of the interviewees give pleasure, fun or stimulation as their pursuit, so the activities could be variable, including drinking, shopping, taking a holiday and even cooking and driving which are not typical entertainment options. When asked about their preferred consumption, John, Yvonne and Michael all use ‘fun’ in their immediate answers, ‘I like having fun’ (John), ‘I like having fun with many people’ (Yvonne), and ‘having fun, travelling’ (Michael). Despite the similar taste for ‘fun’, their preferred activities are
different. John likes travelling, Michael likes holidays with his family and Yvonne likes going to clubs and socializing with friends. Other evidence of ‘contemplative gratification’ can be found in window shopping and self-guided tours. Several women interviewees (e.g. Diana, Wendy and Julia) can gain pleasure from window shopping, although there is no real contact with the objects. Besides, almost all the seven interviewees who like travelling prefer self-guided tours, although they are more time and energy consuming. The reason is that these consumption practices allow more freedom to construct pleasure and so generate higher density of contemplative pleasure. In particular, they create tensions with subsequent release, which are thought to be stronger stimulations leading to more persistent pleasure (Scitovsky, 1976).

Social pleasure, stressing mutuality, reciprocity and sharing, ‘encompasses participation, sympathy and trust, and of which companionship is … a very important instance’ (Warde and Martens, 2000: 186). This category of gratification is a contribution from Warde and Martens. It is often neglected by scholars but is found to be a key element of enjoyment in the Chinese context, where family commitments and obligations are emphasized. In addition to the personal pleasure elicited from tourism, the interviewees also extend it to family pleasure, sensing it as a means to fulfil family commitment. In fact, tourism is conceived as an ideal family activity. Grey’s and Michael’s families¹ usually go to places with beautiful natural views for holidays, and Michael especially prefers travelling with family, as it can bring more ‘fun’. White, who likes cultural heritage sites while his wife and son prefer natural landscapes, even compromises his interests in order to share pleasures with his family. Besides tourism, the seeking of social pleasure is also exhibited by Michael’s investment in various ‘playful’ courses for his children. He is gratified by the fact of his children gaining pleasure and by imagining his children leading a good life in the future. The importance of social gratification is thus revealed in the interviews. As accounted by Warde and Martens (2000: 207), ‘a key basis of gratification is social participation, particularly in situations where the enjoyment of each person is dependent upon the enjoyment of all, where affect or mood is irredeemably a joint creation’.

In pleasure-seeking, gender plays a role in differentiating the patterns. Among the interviewees who display more significant orientation to personal pleasure, most of them are men and young women, who are usually not the people doing the bulk of the household shopping. By contrast, the older female interviewees tend to stress comfort, relaxation or

¹ Meaning the core family, with their wife and children.
identity in consumption. A possible reason, as indicated above, is that the women who are in charge of household shopping usually make their consumer decisions with regard to long-term family benefits, while men and young women in their 20s are allowed to be more concentrated on pleasure-seeking, although they might aim at other dimensions as well.

The orientation to personal pleasure and comfort is thus significant in the tastes of the interviewees. The pursuit of pleasure - seeking sensual, instrumental, contemplative and social pleasures, is tempered with the pursuit of comfort - seeking satisfaction of physical and mental demands. This consumer orientation can explain the consumption patterns of the middle class.

The moral justification

As reviewed in chapter 2, Chinese culture does not readily promote individual pleasure and comfort. Therefore, the interviewees might also need moral justification together with the aesthetic ones regarding pleasure and comfort, to make themselves confident in their tastes. It is revealed that almost all interviewees provide moral justifications, which are mainly concerned with ‘affordability’, that is, with the capability to keep the balance between expenditure and income. The traditional values of frugality and moderation are again implied here.

It is found that the interviewees can generally afford the material goods and services they like and their consumption can be balanced with savings and long-term welfare. Sage and John are two cases who are considered extravagant by family and friends but can justify their tastes by their ‘being affordable’. Sage, the real-estate professional in his 30s, is very bold in property and financial investment which has left him with several bank loans. He explains his taste by his financial strategy:

‘I think it’s meaningless to save money for an emergency, as we are waiting for happiness not for accidents [laughs]’
‘My thoughts are simple. If there is an emergency, I’ll withdraw money from the investment which is better than saving in the bank.’ (Sage, 31, male, migrant, department manager in a leading real-estate private company)
John, the 40-year-old CPO who often goes on luxury holidays, is also confident about his taste, ‘the investments and financing I'm doing are just plans for the future, but you can’t control the future so what's the point of worrying about it?’

The pursuit of pleasure and comfort is implied in their justification. Furthermore, the moral justification mainly lies in the concern with finance: the pursuit of pleasure and comfort can be balanced with long-term welfare. This justification by affordability could also be inferred from the judgment of tastes, in which the interviewees generally agree that good taste is not always associated with expensive goods. Consequently, the satisfaction of their material aspirations does not necessarily lead to excessive expenditure. The nature and extent of their material aspirations will be further elaborated later. The moderate expenditure revealed by the qualitative data is also consistent with the quantitative findings, where moderation and frugality are embodied in their pursuit of pleasure and comfort.

Because affordability plays such a crucial role in the justification of taste, one main anxiety is derived from being unable to afford what they would like. However, only two interviewees, with relatively lower income, show intense anxieties about their financial situation. This finding, however, should be understood in relation to the judgment of ‘being affordable’ among the interviewees, which will be explicated in the next section on material aspirations.

Certainly, there are interviewees who used to experience, or are currently experiencing ambivalence in their taste: they are not sure if theirs is good or bad taste. However, they account for only a small portion of the sample, mainly those who take display of status or social identity as their main motive of consumption. Patrick and Joyce are generally confident of their taste, although they sometimes wonder if they have become snobbish or vulgar in the pursuit of designer goods. Therefore, it can be concluded that although there is ambivalence in a few cases, the majority of the interviewees feel justified in their pursuit of pleasure and comfort through consumption.

Some implications of the transition in social values can be drawn from the moral justification. First of all, frugality, the traditional virtue, still has impact on people’s consumption. Yet, if economically affordable, the pursuit of pleasure and comfort is considered legitimate by the interviewees and so does not need to be justified on other traditional moral grounds of work ethic or family commitments. Although the interviewees
can obtain instrumental and social pleasure through work achievement and sharing pleasure with family, hard work and sufficient family commitment are generally not considered as necessary conditions of pursuing pleasure and comfort.

**Discussion and implications**

The above analysis has shed light on how tastes are shaped among the middle class in Beijing. In the distribution of taste, income, gender and age play important roles in differentiating people’s tastes. As a consequence of the judgment of taste, social divisions are created. However, the divisions between migrants and natives do not appear in the judgment of taste. No interviewee explicitly differentiates the taste of the natives from the taste of the migrants\(^1\). Moreover, Diana, native and female, particularly mentions that it is difficult to identify migrants from natives through taste. Differences in sense of belonging and impact from Beijing between the two groups are insignificant. Instead, income plays a more important role in social well-being, which is consistent with the role it plays in shaping consumption patterns. The reason might be that, for the middle class, Beijing has witnessed their upward social mobility so career and income, rather than community origins, are a more crucial factor in the creation of internal divisions.

It is also shown that the pursuit of pleasure and comfort is significant in the justification of taste, and the interviewees are generally confident of their taste. The aesthetic justification by pleasure and comfort is tempered with the moral justification by keeping a balance between expenditure and income. The aesthetic justification also intersects with family commitment and work ethic. The justifications of taste and the concomitant anxieties could be understood by the structural model which has been made well-known by the work of Bauman, Beck, Giddens and Warde (see Warde, 1994). This sees consumer anxieties as institutional, ‘the dissolution of the importance of traditional institutional influence on cultural life and an associated intensification in the importance of individual responsibility and biography’ (Woodward, 2006: 268). In the Chinese context, the tension about choosing aesthetic or ‘tasteful’ products, as addressed above, is also caused by the dissolution of the importance of the institutional factors, or could be more accurately narrated as ‘fewer authorities to consult’ (ibid.). Whilst empowered to choose freely, consumers cannot rely on social disciplines or authorities but are required to justify their

\(^{1}\) There were divisions between the migrants and the natives in tastes thirty years ago, for example as mentioned by Hazel. But according to my interviews the divisions are disappearing.
choices. Hence, it can be seen that in contemporary China the power of social discipline has become more constrained and consumer sovereignty has thus been emphasized.

**Material aspirations**

As for material culture, the social relations and social interactions involved in acquiring, using and exchanging material goods (gift-giving, family commitment and everyday shopping) have been addressed in the previous chapters. The other part of material culture, the meanings of goods, has also been discussed before and will be elaborated in this section through the analysis of aspirations for material goods.

Although they are interested in certain material goods, the interviewees generally show no obsession with them. Few material goods, even expensive items, are particularly treasured by the interviewees. Julia, Michael, Zoë and Lincoln give a definite answer of ‘nothing’ to the question about what material goods they treasure. Although Patrick has invested a lot in designer and branded goods, he finds no material goods deserve special sentiment. Even Diana, who defines herself as having ‘*strong desires to possess [material goods]*’ and is sometimes stressed by excessive consumption, has no particular goods in her possessions to cherish, as ‘*they all come and go*’. Some material goods, however, associated with cultural capital and memories, have special sentiments attached. For instance, books, gifts from friends or family members, photographs and other goods bearing certain memories. Hans cherishes every book he owns and reads all of them. The material goods treasured by Hazel are a jewellery box containing her graduate certificates, marriage certificate and her wedding ring, which have witnessed various stages of her life. The type of relationship with objects involving passion, happiness or anxiety is an extreme example of objects bearing meanings. Belk (1995), in his study on collecting, explains this relationship as ‘collecting is an acquisitive, possessive, and materialistic pursuit, which commits the collector to a continuing quest for inessential consumer goods that are removed from any functional capacity that may once have had’.

The contrasting sentiments towards material goods actually reflect the duality of the meanings of goods. On the one hand, the interviewees would like to distinguish themselves from commodity fetishism and vulgarity, in order to establish a certain image or maintain a harmonized relationship with others. On the other hand, the emotional relationship between material goods and people highlights the owner’s individuality. This dialectic is
described as the ‘modalities of differentiation and integration’ by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981: 38). The modality of differentiation refers to the process in which objects are used to separate the owner from the social context, stressing ‘the unique qualities of the owner, his or her skills and superiority over others’ (ibid.). The material goods bearing sentiments in this dissertation, representing the particular life trajectory or the taste of the owner, serve the process of differentiation. By contrast, the modality of integration refers to the process where objects symbolically express the integration of the owner with the social context, emphasizing the similarity between the owner and others, for example shared descent, religion or life-style (ibid.). The appropriation of the expensive material goods by the interviewees should be understood under the modality of integration.

Having collected preliminary knowledge about the extent to which the interviewees desire material goods, this section will approach these concerns: Are there any changes in the material aspirations in their life? What implications can be drawn from their material aspirations? Are they satisfied with their material life? Is there any anxiety or ambivalence involved in their material aspirations?

**Transition of material aspirations**

During one’s lifetime, income plays an important role in the transition of material aspirations. Patrick became interested in luxury goods after getting a well-paid job. As reflected by him, expanded material aspirations are derived mainly from increase in wealth as well as plural commitments:

‘Setting up a steady relationship and a family, one becomes more practical in that life is focused on working and earning more money for the family’s well-being and social status as well as [satisfying] vanity, which makes the goal more explicit.’ (Patrick, 27, male, migrant, team leader in a leading IT MNC)

Bella explains from her own experience why material aspirations tend to expand as income grows. Taking an example of her breakfast in university, she said that she turned to a more expensive breakfast scheme after she happened to try it once. It is the comfort and gratification it yields that makes her aspire to more expensive material goods if income allows:
‘Once the level of consumption has improved, it's hard to lower it. If you often buy higher-graded goods which bring higher quality of life, you get to know what kinds of food are more reliable and what brands of clothes are comfortable.’ (Bella, 29, female, migrant, civil servant in the central government)

However, the case of Sage indicates that the trajectory of material aspirations does not necessarily follow a simple linear dynamic; the nature and extent of material aspirations may become more moderate when one reaches a certain stage. The time when Sage longed for various material goods was when his income was low but he had to pay living costs and also wanted to fulfil family commitments. Before coming to Beijing, he was poor but had not many demands either. With the progress of his career, he is able to provide a comfortable life for himself and his family, but he also finds his material aspirations less intense:

‘[…] It [material aspiration] was extremely intense then. But now, objectively speaking, the desires are much more practical but of larger quantity and more explicit. But now I feel I lack nothing. If I have desires for houses and cars, they would be more like an investment.’ (Sage, 31, male, migrant, department manager in a leading private real-estate company)

By contrast, a majority of interviewees claim that their material aspirations have remained consistently moderate throughout their life, although the underlying mechanisms are differentiated. As stressed by Zack, the 33-year-old general manager from Guangdong province, he normally purchases material goods according to his purchasing power, and his material aspirations do not change greatly as his wealth accumulates, or in his words, his ‘concepts on material pursuits are healthy’. Therefore, he argues that richness relies more on one’s material aspirations than on wealth. This psychological judgment of richness is salient among the interviewees, as will be discussed below. The consistently moderate desire for material goods, as explained by Zack, are owed to his middle class parent family background, in which he had never felt deprived so does not particularly want anything.

The relationship between material scarcity and aspirations seems plausible and could explain the case of Sage. However, it is challenged by the experiences of Zoë and Tom. Zoë’s parental family is not well-off, but she shares the similar psychological judgment of
richness with Zack. Furthermore, Tom explains that he has no aspirations for expensive material goods because he is from a poor family background. Running a company with an annual salary of a million yuan, Tom and his wife still keep some habits developed from the time when their life was not so well-off.

‘I think life is good, and I haven’t found the demands different between the time when there was little money and when there is more money. I mean, if you have 100,000yuan, you go to eat suan la fen\(^1\) at the street stalls, and also enjoy it when you have 10 million yuan, it is good [laughs]. I like this feeling. You don’t aim at saving money, that’s nothing to do with it.’ (Tom, 36, migrant, Chief Business Administrator in a medium-scaled private company in media)

Another case like Tom and Zoë is John, who has consistently enjoyed the pleasure brought by material goods, even when he was young and his material resources were insufficient. Resembling the psychological judgment of richness, John also claims that he had neither felt stressed when his salary was only 1,000yuan a month, nor felt suddenly rich when he was working in the USA with a much higher salary. Thus, material aspirations for John also appear independent of increase in wealth and of family background.

However, the psychological judgment of richness might indicate a justification of social inequality, since a lot of interviewees are ‘richer’ than many other people in the society. The dubious impact of family background should be understood in the context that it is expressed in the narratives of middle class interviewees who have been affluent for a couple of years so there might be a sense of superiority and justification involved.

Besides income being a crucial factor, material aspirations could also vary due to the changes in society and personal life. Marriage is usually a milestone and people need more material resources to fulfil family commitments, as is revealed by the data. In fact, marriage is also a good lens for the transitions of material aspiration led by social changes. According to the young interviewees who have recently got married or are about to be married, a house is essential for a new family. Back in the early 1990s, however, while housing gradually became a commodity, it was never essential for marriage. As recalled by Green, ‘in that time [when we got married], we did not have much concern about material goods, as neither of us cared about them’, and they were satisfied with living in their

\(^{1}\) ‘Suan la fen’ is a popular food in China, usually served at stalls or cheap restaurants.
parents’ house. Further back to the late 1970s and the early 1980s when Hazel was married, what new couples desired were only ‘the three big durable goods’: washing machine, sewing machine and camera.

In addition to marriage, migration to Beijing also leads to changes in consumption. It is found that people’s everyday life is shaped by Beijing through its distinguishing culture, more developed economy and political atmosphere. The changes in consumption patterns after migration mainly include more frequent participation in consumption practices, expanded material aspirations and transition of tastes and values. In general, the transitions are more significant among the migrants who came to Beijing at a younger age than those who came at an older age.

It can be seen that the transitions of material aspirations mainly correlate with income, personal life, social changes and migration to the metropolis. The trajectory of growing material aspirations, although mediated by income, essentially implies an orientation to personal pleasure and comfort.

**Justifications of material aspirations**

From the interpretations of their material aspirations, it is also revealed that the interviewees generally embrace the pleasure and comfort brought by material goods. Consistent with their tastes, several interviewees intend to buy more expensive material goods when their income allows. Just as explained by Bella, ‘*they are definitely better and more comfortable than what I’m consuming now*’.

In fact, according to Zoë, aspiration for material goods not only brings about pleasure and comfort, but also a positive stimulus to upward social mobility. Her lifestyle is sharply distinguished from her sister’s, who tries to save money as much as possible and leads a frugal life. Taking an example of her preference for using taxis, Zoë argues that it is a virtue to pursue pleasure and comfort from consumption.

*I could save three to four hours a day by travelling by taxi instead of public transport. [...] And spend another two hours writing an article which leads to publication fees ... by which I can at least earn the taxi fare. So when I take my nephew out, who has very good...

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1 Use of material goods.
performance in school, I told him that good academic record is not the only skill, you should know how to spend money. [...] You should know how to use money to bring you pleasure in body and mind.’ (Zoë, 40, female, migrant, writer and researcher in a state-owned research institute)

The interpretations of the relationship between material aspirations and upward social mobility might show an intersection between the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort and traditional work ethic. The justification that pursuit of pleasure and comfort could lead to a better career and a better life is mentioned by a few interviewees. The justification from Zoë also reflects the higher social, cultural and economic capital of the middle class, which is a key factor for confidence in the pursuit of pleasure and comfort. Compared with Zoë, her sister, who belongs to the working class, would be more anxious if she had a similar lifestyle, because she has fewer sources of income to afford the consumption and less cultural power to legitimate her taste. The latter is very important in the shaping of consumption patterns. The lower social class, with less cultural capital, tends to conform to authorities and social conventions to avoid punishment, for example condemnation or economic costs, while the higher social class is more confident in their own tastes and values, as it can better cope with the concomitant anxieties and ambivalence, enabled by its more abundant resources.

It is revealed that the majority of the interviewees consider their material aspirations moderate and happily justify the pursuit of pleasure and comfort brought by material goods. However, the boundary between moderate and excessive material aspirations is not always clear and a few interviewees show anxieties and ambivalence. Although Joyce and Diana can justify their consumption by using the money they earn, they sometimes feel guilty about their excessive stock of material goods. Diana, the 28-year-old professional, also shows anxiety about her material aspirations, ‘I can’t bear this sort of extravagance myself [laughs]. But I can’t control myself’. On the contrary, Lincoln, the 27-year-old civil servant, controls his material aspirations better. He used to be disturbed by his indulgence in digital products but intends to reduce the expenditure on them as advised by his wife. Patrick recognizes that he becomes vainer as his wealth grows, in terms of more extravagant expenditure, but he is not sure about where the boundary should be placed, ‘I have been telling myself that I should lower my desires, but I can’t imagine [how could I do that when owning substantial wealth]’.
As addressed before, the moral justification of their tastes consists mainly of moderate expenditure and the fact that they can afford it. What do they mean by ‘afford’ or ‘being affordable’? How do they keep the balance between material aspirations and purchasing power? In relation to material aspirations, this justification could be further understood.

Above all, excessive aspirations, especially those beyond one’s purchasing power, are judged as morally bad or might cause anxieties. Even if one can afford them, excessive consumption is also criticized by some interviewees. That is how Olive judges her sister, who is indulgent in ‘stocking’ expensive material goods. Furthermore, sufficient purchasing power is conceived as a necessary condition. Just as mentioned in chapter 7, rather than increasing debt, the interviewees restrict their expenditure and material aspirations to achieve a balance. That aspirations for material goods do not always lead to purchases reveals that purchasing power functions as an important buffer in the consumption patterns. Another connotation of ‘being affordable’ according to the interviewees is that purchasing power is not a sufficient condition so not all that can be afforded will be purchased. Other considerations include taste, for example avoiding ostentation.

Moreover, several young interviewees and a couple of the more frugal ones would like to expand their financial investment rather than satisfying their material aspirations, when asked what they would do with more income. The reason, especially for the young interviewees, might be the massive expenditure and various commitments in setting up and maintaining a family. The priority given to investment is essentially a reflection of frugality among the middle class, which highlights long-term welfare rather than instant pleasure and comfort.

**Discussion and implications**

From the above analysis of material aspirations, aesthetic and moral justifications are revealed: the pursuit of pleasure and comfort is implied again and it can be justified morally in relation to upward social mobility and a better life; another main moral justification refers to the balance between material aspirations and purchasing power. The interviewees consider moderate material aspirations a virtue, and ‘being affordable’ is a crucial concept to understanding their consumer patterns. The findings on this justification are pivotal to this dissertation. By examining both tastes and material aspirations, this
dissertation finds that the majority of the interviewees show satisfaction and confidence with their consumption. The degree of satisfaction, however, varies among them. Those who are younger, or with less family commitment, or accumulated more wealth or with a promising career tend to be more confident in their taste and more satisfied with their material life, for example Flora, Olive, White, John and Patrick. In addition, moderate material aspiration is also an important factor. For example Diana, the 28-year-old professional, is anxious about her consumption although she has limited family commitments and earns a good salary. By contrast, Bella, the civil servant of a similar age, is generally satisfied with her consumption despite earning a salary lower than Diana.

The significant satisfaction among the interviewees is associated with a series of social and personal, economic and cultural factors. The social status of the middle class, which has benefited from the reforms, is unarguably an important factor. Furthermore, the interviewees use credit selectively, have income from various sources and could keep the balance between material aspirations and purchasing power; besides, their higher cultural and economic capital also enable them to legitimate their pursuit of pleasure and comfort, as explained above.

Consumption patterns, in addition to the accounts of consumer orientation, are also found to be affected by living in the metropolitan city. On the one hand, various advantages arise from access to the abundant consumer market. On the other hand, there are also tensions and anxieties, including the inconveniences in shopping, less disposable income, intense work pressure, and the problems of product quality. In this context, it is understandable that the interviewees would like to go on holiday during their leisure time and prefer more expensive and high-quality material goods, while highlighting the necessary condition of ‘being affordable’. In particular, the incomplete social security system and severe social inequality (see chapter 7 and 9) have damaged to some extent the confidence of the middle class, who therefore tend to be more cautious than their Western counterparts.

Therefore, the nature and extent of the satisfaction should also be understood in relation to the concomitant anxieties and ambivalence. As revealed before, the interviewees also show anxieties about the repeated upgrading of consumer goods, the over-materialised children’s consumption, their tight financial situation and excessive shopping, and some of them are also ambivalent about the pursuit of status and the boundary between excessive and moderate material aspirations. Nevertheless, at most one or two of the above tensions are
significant for each interviewee and most of the interviewees show general satisfaction with their consumption. The concomitant anxieties and ambivalence help to understand the complexity of the high degree of satisfaction expressed by the interviewees.

A point to mention is the indifference towards the public sphere among the interviewees. It can be seen from the data on anxieties and ambivalence that the concerns of the interviewees are more related to the personal sphere, e.g. quality problems and purchasing power, than to the public sphere, e.g. the natural environment and social policy. It is therefore inferred that consciousness of citizenship is not yet significant among the middle class in Beijing and this is a crucial context of their satisfaction and confidence. However, this conclusion needs further research, as the topic of this interview might have given the interviewees the impression that only their personal life was of interest, so they did not feel it appropriate to talk about their public concerns.

**Conclusion**

Together with everyday consumption and material culture in the previous chapters, this dissertation has so far examined the consumption patterns from various dimensions. The orientation to personal pleasure and comfort is found to be significant among the interviewees. This new orientation introduces a set of justifiable practices – ones in which it becomes permissible to consider one’s own pleasure and comfort when determining how to live one’s life. It is revealed that the pursuit of pleasure is tempered with the pursuit of comfort in the aesthetic justification, and moderate expenditure and material aspirations constitute a main moral justification. Income plays an important role in the expenditure and frequency of their preferred consumption and gender and age are important to the distribution of taste. Gender is also crucial to the nature and extent of the orientation to personal pleasure. The division in taste between migrants and natives is not significant and this implies the considerable impact of living in the metropolitan city.

The existence and operation of the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort is a main argument of this dissertation. The pursuit of pleasure and comfort has become legitimate among the middle class in Beijing, who are also more autonomous in consumption than their predecessors. The implication is that in contemporary China individual sovereignty has been highlighted and social disciplines have been gradually relaxed.
Chapter 10 Conclusion

Introduction

In recent decades, many commentators have drawn attention to the expansion of the Chinese economy and its great potential as a consumer market. This dissertation, with specifically sociological concerns, has focused on the consumption patterns of the middle class in metropolitan China and its embedded consumer orientations. It is set against a background of the globalisation of consumer culture and the consumer revolution in China. The rise of the middle class and the emergence of consumer culture are the key context of this dissertation.

This dissertation has provided an analysis of the consumption patterns of the middle class, along the dimensions of everyday consumption, taste and material culture, which are the major themes in the Western scholarship on consumer culture. Based on this evidence, it is argued that an orientation to personal pleasure and comfort has emerged.

The main argument concerns the way the new set of consumer orientation operates in metropolitan China. On the one hand, the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort, which did not exist in Maoist China, is implicit in expenditure patterns, shopping habits, consumer preferences and the appropriation and appreciation of material goods among the middle class. On the other hand, the consumer orientation is shaped by established social conventions, traditional values and the metropolitan context. Through analysis of how the consumers justify their tastes and their material aspirations, it is revealed that pursuit of pleasure, tempered with pursuit of comfort, is highly significant as a form of aesthetic justification; and that living within one’s means, keeping a balance between expenditure and income, is the main moral justification.

Consumption patterns of the middle class

The orientation to personal pleasure and comfort was firstly implied in the quantitative data. Compared with the lower class, the middle class in urban China more frequently participate in eating out, branded consumption, and leisure and cultural consumption. Social class, however, is not the only determinant; younger age, higher income and living in the metropolitan cities are also associated with more frequent participation in the
consumption practices. The important roles that social class and age play in differentiating consumption patterns reflect the distinguishing tastes of the middle class and the rapid social changes of the past several decades.

The quantitative findings are echoed and expanded by the qualitative analysis. Age, gender and income are found to be significant factors in differentiating expenditure, shopping frequency and locations, and taste among the interviewees. Living in Beijing, a metropolitan city, also has impact on the consumption patterns. The reason is that although the supplies of consumer goods are increasingly homogeneous all over the country, the regional economic disparities are still very considerable and the metropolitan cities are more developed in many aspects. However, the division between middle class migrants and middle class natives within the metropolitan cities is insignificant in terms of the patterns of consumption, as revealed by both the quantitative and the qualitative data. The reason might lie in the generally higher social, economic and cultural capital of the metropolitan middle class, as indicated in their consumption patterns. More abundant resources enable the migrants to overcome potential policy barriers (e.g. the ‘hukou’ system) and other disadvantages (for example, possibly less financial support from family and relatively less social capital).

By examining multiple dimensions, this dissertation unveils more of the consumption patterns of the middle class through qualitative analysis. In the first place, the nature and process of consumption is described. In their everyday life, the interviewees participate in diverse consumption practices, such as eating out, socialising activities, and going to a wide variety of cultural events. It is found that generation, type of work institutions and income play important roles in the patterns of household expenditure. As China has experienced dramatic social changes since the late 1970s, the generation born or growing up in that period has established a distinct pattern of consumption. Generally speaking, the interviewees of that generation spend more on food and houses and participate more extensively in modern consumer culture, for example shopping online, using digital goods and eating out. Besides, people working for government institutions generally have easier access to housing. However, because of better life chances and hence higher income, the majority of interviewees own one or more houses, which indicates the better-off living situation of the middle class in Beijing.
The extent of family commitments, especially those between children and parents, is a distinguishing convention in China. Various material goods and services are used by the interviewees to fulfil family commitments. In contrast to their parents, who aimed primarily to provide an affluent life for their children, the interviewees place emphasis on the spiritual investment: love, care, instruction and communication, and consumption patterns for their children imply an orientation to personal pleasure and comfort. The pattern of investment in children is a reflection of their particular taste, their higher cultural capital and the improved life chances of the contemporary middle class in Beijing. As for the commitment to parents, it is conceived as both obligation and virtue that children support parents after gaining an independent income. Furthermore, the generational differences, in line with social changes since the late 1970s, are found in the obligation towards parents. The interviewees aged above 30 usually give material goods or money regularly and even buy houses for parents, although the younger ones tend to send money or gifts less regularly. The sense of obligation to the extended family is less intense. The judgement of closeness can be understood by the pattern of social relations in Chinese society as illustrated by Fei (1992). The particular mode of social relations is also shown in the practice of gift-giving. Expensive gifts with thoughtful ideas usually go to family members or close friends. The meanings of material goods contributed to children and parents, as revealed in my dissertation, are more associated with the ritual of fulfilling responsibilities or to prove the intimacy of the relationship (Miller, 1998a) than with status display, as argued by other scholars studying East Asian cultures (e.g. Wong and Ahuvia, 1998:13).

Examination of generational differences shows again the age effects in consumption and indicates how people’s tastes, expenditure and material aspirations are shaped by different social contexts. Compared with their parents, the interviewees are generally more enthusiastic about pleasure, comfort, identity-claims and status-display in their consumption and their expenditure is also higher. The orientation to personal pleasure and comfort is thus more significant among the contemporary middle class. The pursuit of pleasure and comfort can be generally justified and the power of economic and cultural capital is particularly implied in their interpretations.

The power of personal orientation, towards pleasure, comfort, self-identity and self-reward, is particularly implied in the judgement of taste, as can be seen from interactions with colleagues and friends. However, universality of taste, stressing reciprocity and sharing, is
more significant in interactions with family members. The distinct judgements of taste between ‘public' and ‘private' life are essentially a reflection of how the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort is tempered by social conventions, especially family commitment.

The interviewees reveal their tastes through preferences for particular cultural goods and events, preferences for refined or high-quality but often inconspicuous goods, and in the choices of activities for relaxation and leisure. Age, gender and income are pivotal factors leading to differentiated patterns of taste within the middle class in Beijing. In the judgement of taste, the interviewees distance themselves from vulgar taste and popular trends. They do not reject designer goods but generally prefer less well-known brands to avoid being ostentatious. Although the extent to which modern fashion is embraced varies by age, a critical view of popular culture is shared among the interviewees. When evaluating good and bad taste, the interviewees stress refinement in aesthetics, manners and cultural dispositions, although, of course, economic capital is also a necessary condition for turning taste into reality. Social divisions are created by distinguishing oneself from people with different tastes. Most striking are the divisions within the middle class. On the one hand, the wealthier people are aware of their superiority in economic capital; on the other hand, the remainder of middle class members accept that they are in a different position from the super rich but they do not particularly resent or envy them. The findings confirm the crucial role that cultural capital plays in the judgement of taste and a non-hostile relationship between the two groups.

Justifications of taste imply a significant orientation to personal pleasure and comfort. Although a few interviewees pursue status-display or identity in their consumption, the pursuit of pleasure and comfort is the most significant. Specifically, the aesthetic of pleasure, seeking sensual, instrumental, contemplative and social pleasures, is tempered with the aesthetic of comfort, seeking satisfaction of physical demands. An orientation to personal pleasure pervades the middle class in Beijing and gender plays a key role in differentiating the patterns of pleasure-seeking. Consistent with taste, material aspirations (the extent to which people desire material goods and services) also point to a similar pattern that the interviewees generally celebrate pleasure and comfort brought by material goods.
The trajectory of material aspirations shows how consumption goes through changes over a life time. Income plays an important role in the transitions. Several interviewees have expanded their material aspirations and increased their expenditure as their income rises. However, in several other cases, material aspirations have stayed consistently moderate, no matter how much socio-economic status rises or how much wealth is accumulated. Growing material aspirations imply adoption of an orientation to personal pleasure and comfort.

**The orientation to personal pleasure and comfort in China**

Change in consumer orientation among the middle class is itself not a new finding. One contribution of this dissertation, however, is to highlight the self-referential orientations and analyze consumer orientations from the dimensions of everyday consumption, taste and material culture. It is also shown how the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort is aligned with the particular situation in China. The findings from this dissertation challenge both the stereotype of the Chinese new rich and the one-dimensional picture of consumer culture in China which current literature argues tends to be either conspicuous or frugal.

The social conventions that frame consumption practices arise mainly from gender roles, family commitments, gift-giving and traditional values of frugality and moderation. First of all, traditional gender roles are found in household shopping. Wives commonly shop for food and clothes for the whole family. This division of labour is a reification of the dominant discourse of ‘shopping’ and ‘consumption’ among the interviewees. Shopping is usually associated with leisure, extravagance and being young and feminine. Gender roles, however, with respect to family finance are less conservative than in household shopping. Husbands and wives usually combine their incomes, and the family budget and expenditure is mostly managed by both of them.

The reading of gender roles helps to understand the consumption patterns. The more traditional gender roles in household shopping could explain why a majority of female interviewees aim mainly at comfort in consumption, while a majority of male and young single female interviewees display a more significant orientation to personal pleasure. On the other hand, the more equal economic status of wives and husbands enables both female and male interviewees to pursue what they want: pleasure, comfort, identity-claims or
status-display. The orientation to personal pleasure and comfort is found to be significant among both women and men.

It is revealed that material goods and services are not only used to meet personal demands but also to fulfil family commitments. In particular, social pleasure, emphasizing mutuality, reciprocity and sharing, is significant. The interviewees not only seek pleasure through consumption for themselves but through purchasing material goods and services for family members and friends. Furthermore, they also encourage the pursuit of pleasure and comfort in their children and, to some extent, in their parents. It is thus shown how the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort is processed in the particular situation in China. However, it needs stressing that the interviewees do not primarily justify their consumption by family commitments; rather, personal pleasure and comfort are as important as contributions to children and parents. By associating justification of personal consumption with family commitments, this finding updates existing studies on investment in children among the Chinese middle class (e.g. Davis & Sensenbrenner, 2000; Fan, 2000; Wang, 2007).

Although the middle class in Beijing generally embrace pleasure and comfort, their consumption behaviour retains traditional features of frugality and moderation. The balance between expenditure and savings, investment and purchasing power is a main moral justification of consumption among the middle class. From the quantitative data, it is revealed that only high-income earners frequently engage in consumption practices aiming at pleasure and comfort, while other middle class members tend to be ‘sometimes’ or ‘occasionally’ involved in this consumption. In everyday consumption, according to the interview data, the interviewees adopt practical strategies to enhance their purchasing power. They not only go shopping at department stores but also go shopping overseas, online and in bargain shops. The affluent interviewees more frequently purchase expensive items, while the less affluent ones tend to purchase both expensive and cheap items.

The selective use of credit among the interviewees also implies the traditional value of frugality. In terms of family finance, the interviewees exhibit a distance from traditional frugality but nevertheless remain moderate in their consumption. The fact is that few families budget for daily expenditure, but no family among the interviewees admitted to exceeding its income. Some interviewees participate extensively in the financial market to expand their income sources, as opposed to saving money which is the traditional way of accumulating wealth. Housing mortgages are common among the middle class households.
but credit and bank loans are rarely used for everyday consumption, although the younger interviewees – aged below 50 - more frequently use credit cards.

It can be seen that the middle class contains well-disciplined consumers who consciously keep a balance between expenditure and income and long-term welfare. This feature is further illustrated in their tastes and material aspirations, where the judgement of ‘being affordable’ is crucial to understanding how the interviewees justify their tastes and how they keep the financial balance. In offering justifications, some distinguish their consumption from commodity fetishism and vanity: it is not extravagant as long as it is affordable. This type of justification is also found in Zhou’s (2005) study of middle class consumers.

The interview data are based on fieldwork in Beijing. Besides social conventions, consumption practices are also shaped by living in the metropolitan city. On the one hand, the interviewees benefit from the abundant consumer market which provides various opportunities to gain pleasure and comfort. On the other hand, there are anxieties and some ambivalence. First, the high living costs in Beijing impair the pleasure exacted from material goods to some extent, by intensifying the tension between material aspirations and purchasing power, consumption and saving, and aesthetics and morals. Second, Beijing shares problems with other metropolitan cities, in terms of large population, time-consuming travel and intense work pressure, which counteract the pleasure in shopping and consumption. Third, an incomplete social security system and the problems of social inequality affect the confidence of the consumers and their purchasing power so they are often cautious about purchases. In addition, a few interviewees also express ambivalence about their expanded material aspirations and excessive consumption.

Thus, this dissertation has confirmed the emergence of a new consumer orientation in China and further articulated its nature and extent and how it intersects with traditional values. The tensions that shape the consumption patterns of the middle class, as summarised by Wang (2007), are also indicated in my research findings. The interviewees, who seek to keep a balance between expenditure and income, show distinguishing features of frugality and rationality when compared with their Western counterparts. Consumer sovereignty has become more important, as can be seen from the pursuit of personal pleasure and comfort and other consumer decisions. The interviewees do not particularly reject popular culture but participate in a wide variety of cultural consumption practices.
As to their identity as a middle class, some of the interviewees indeed show ambivalence or confusion. By examining how people organise their everyday life and the social values implied in their consumption patterns, this dissertation generally confirms that a consumer revolution is taking place in contemporary China, the claims of an extensive literature (e.g. Davis, 2005; Davis (ed.), 2000; Wang, 2005b).

The in-depth and comprehensive findings on the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort have filled in a gap in knowledge about Chinese consumers. Most of the interviewees generally show satisfaction and confidence in their consumption. A most important reason, related to the social context, is that the contemporary middle class are the beneficiaries of the reforms of 1978 and it can be anticipated that their interests will continue to be protected by the government. In line with their higher social status, the middle class in Beijing have generally accumulated greater economic and cultural capital which enables them to legitimate the pursuit of pleasure and comfort. In addition, the interviewees generally turn out to be well-disciplined consumers. That is why most of the interviewees claim that they can afford what they buy and are generally happy with their consumption. However, anxieties and ambivalence in different nature and extent exist in the interviewees, which show the complexity and variations of the general high degree of satisfaction.

The elucidation of the consumer orientation has also challenged the stereotype of the Chinese new rich. As shown in this dissertation, the middle class are not a homogeneous group but are diverse in consumption patterns across income, genders, ages and other parameters. The extent of anxieties and ambivalence also varies among the middle class. Furthermore, their consumption is involved with ‘trade-offs’, such as compromises with family commitments and maintaining a balance between income and expenditure. This fact, however, is usually concealed by the extravagant expenditure of a small number of people. The middle class are a diversified group and their consumption patterns must be understood in relation to their engagement in social practices and social contexts.

In terms of methodology, mixed methods have proven productive in researching social practices. Quantitative findings preliminarily detect how age, income and social class differentiate the consumption patterns of the urban population. Qualitative analysis adds more vivid stories and an appreciation of more dimensions in everyday life, taste and material culture. The moderate consumption of the urban population revealed by the
quantitative analysis is further explicated by the qualitative findings which indicate how the pattern of moderate consumption differs from traditional frugality. The emergence of an orientation to personal pleasure and comfort is implied in the quantitative data and then elaborated by the qualitative analysis in relation to social conventions and social context. As indicated throughout the dissertation, quantitative and qualitative methods can be combined, enhancing the reliability and profundity of the research findings.

Through this dissertation, it is also implied that a Western theoretical framework, if deployed appropriately, is helpful to provide new perspectives on Chinese consumer studies. This dissertation, for the first time, interprets consumption patterns in the Chinese middle class from the perspectives of sociology of everyday life, sociology of taste and material culture. These are major themes in Western scholarship, but have never been appropriately elaborated in the case of China. In the light of the theoretical frameworks, this dissertation has shown how the orientation to personal pleasure and comfort aligns with the particular situation of China. Furthermore, Western scholarship is also confirmed and complemented with empirical evidence from China. As is illustrated in this dissertation, the justification of tastes is essential in modern society and moral justification plays an important role in the shaping of taste. Besides, how people engage with everyday life, through practices, interpretations and interactions, proves fundamental in understanding consumption patterns.

Limitations, discussions and further research agenda

The limitations of this thesis lie mainly with the sources of data and the technical support. The available quantitative data contain few variables about consumption practices and the sample for the metropolitan population is quite small, which might impair the reliability of the findings. Fortunately, there is qualitative data to complement and adjust the quantitative findings. In terms of the qualitative data, the diversity of the sample might be limited by my network. It remains to be examined whether people from the elite class or very poor parent family background have any distinguishing features in consumption. Fieldwork was only based in Beijing. And the middle class in Shanghai or the other cities might be distinct in certain aspects of consumption. Therefore, not all the conclusions can be generalised to the middle class in the other metropolitan cities or to the whole of the middle class in China. As to the technical support, the analysis is constrained by difficulties with getting access to the most desirable computer software. The French
software SPAD\textsuperscript{1} is superior in visualising MCA coordinates and the clouds of individuals, but this was unfortunately unavailable to the researcher. Instead, a different algorithm is used within the more easily available STATA software.

In future, research could also be extended to an explicit comparative study between the middle class in China and in European countries or the US: What are the differences in taste and material aspirations? To what extent is the consumer orientation different? The interests could lie in the omnivore orientation towards taste (Peterson & Kern, 1996), differentiated modes of participation in consumption practices, ambivalence in consumption, and transitions in material aspirations. Anxieties and dilemmas turn out to be a good lens upon the social context which shapes consumption practices. Further studies could collect more data on them among the middle class, to see whether there are other tensions not revealed by this dissertation. A longitudinal method could also be applied in this field to explore how the anxieties and ambivalence undergo changes in the changing society. The dissertation could also be extended within China, across all the social classes.

The literature review found no satisfactory survey data focusing specifically on the consumer culture in China. Hence, it would be of great interest and value to collect more survey data in the future, especially on consumer preferences, consumer orientations, the use of material goods, tensions and anxieties and how the consumer, as an agency, participates in political and social life.

\textsuperscript{1} See more details at http://eng.spadsoft.com/content/view/49/91/ [Accessed in October, 2009]
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