

# From parvenu to “highbrow” tastes: The rise of cultural capital in China’s intergenerational elites

Gordon C. Li<sup>1,2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

<sup>2</sup>School of Finance and Management, SOAS University of London, London, UK

## Correspondence

Gordon C. Li, Department of Sociology, the London School of Economics and Political Science, London WC2A 2AE, UK.  
Email: G.C.Li@lse.ac.uk

## Abstract

A new generation of elites distinguished by their cultural endowments has emerged in China. Unlike the older generation of elites who signaled status through the display of wealth but shared similar tastes, the new generation of cultured elites has sophisticated, often Western-oriented “highbrow” tastes in their cultural consumption. By comparing the upbringings and the tastes of interviewees from various backgrounds, this study suggests a widening taste-chasm between the elites and the underclasses in urban cities. The social process behind this is argued to be the rapid formation of cultural capital in China, in which parental privileges accumulated in the market economy converted into cultural privileges in the new generation of new elites.

## KEYWORDS

China, cultural capital, cultural consumption, intergenerational mobility, music taste

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The transformation of China since the Reform and opening-up has been a subject of much research. While the scale of economic development is unprecedented, the gap between the elites and the underprivileged has widened considerably. Income inequality initially decreased in the 1980s but has increased since the 1990s (Bian & Logan, 1996; Yang, 1999). The Gini coefficient, which measures inequality in income distribution, surged from low levels in the late 1980s to have now leapfrogged “capitalist” societies such as the United States and United Kingdom, as well as other countries at similar levels of development as China (World Bank, 2010; Xie & Zhou, 2014).

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Studies have explained the rising income inequality as due to the widened disparity between the rural and urban areas (Wu & Treiman, 2007; Zhang & Treiman, 2013) and in people's educational attainment (Nee, 1991; Wu & Xie, 2003; Zhou, 2000).

While there is plenty of research on economic inequality in China, research on intergenerational transmission of privileges in China is relatively rare. Social mobility has decreased since the 1990s (Zhou & Xie, 2019), while the influence of family background on educational attainment has increased (Wu, 2010). Yang et al.'s article finds a shift in the composition of elites from staff and workers in an earlier generation to highly educated professionals today (2021). My research builds upon those findings by examining the cultural side of that change. A consequence of the rising inequality since post-socialism is that a new generation of elites has grown up with privileged upbringings, leading to a wide gap in cultural endowments today.

This research suggests a causal link between economic inequality, intergenerational transmission of privilege, and the widening cultural disparity in China today—the shift in elite taste from parvenue to “highbrow” taste, and the intergenerational explanations for the shift. While the earlier generation of elites displayed wealth with parvenu-tastes reflective of their humble socialist roots, the new generation of elites distinguishes with their deeply embodied cultural endowments. The gap between the elites and the underclasses has widened beyond differences in material ownership into the values and perceptions inculcated through divergent upbringings. Understanding cultural disparity today requires more than a synchronic examination of differences in material resources today—it calls for a diachronic examination of the rigidification of past inequalities into the present.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides the framework that explains how cultural endowments can be used to perpetuate intergenerational privilege. Based on a study in France, Bourdieu argues that inequalities in resources are not limited to economic capital but also include cultural and other forms of capital, as they can also be converted into social advantages (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Cultural capital includes cultural resources such as education and cultural knowledge—“institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” (Lamont & Lareau, 1988, p. 156). More importantly, cultural capital can also be in embodied forms such as preferences, tastes, and manners of movement (Friedman, 2011; Holt, 1997). When deeply embedded into the *habitus*, cultural capital may appear as “natural” qualities as they are hard to acquire later in life (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu believes that cultural consumption is in homology with social position, such as the linkage between “highbrow” art and elites (1984). His theory on cultural capital as elite social reproduction has also been supported in other Western societies (eg. DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Khan, 2011; Kraaykamp & Van Eijck, 2010; Savage et al., 2013).

However, Bourdieu's theory contains Western-centric presumptions that differ from China's social and cultural realities, questioning whether his argument on cultural capital as a mechanism of social reproduction is directly applicable to China. First, the formation of cultural capital in the West has been more gradual, over longer periods of relatively low social mobility (Accominotti et al., 2018; DiMaggio, 1982). China had very high social equality under socialism, with high social mobility as late as 10 years after reform. Due to the continual urbanization in China, from 26% in 1990 to 60% in 2018, statistics on social mobility continue to be higher than in the West (Zhou & Xie, 2019; NBS China, 2020). It is not certain that the relatively high social mobility in China is fertile for the formation of cultural capital—an exclusive culture of the elites. Second, cultural capital is commonly deployed through the knowledge of “proper” art forms. There is a clear legitimate culture in the West—the long consecrated classical tradition, with centuries of a continuous lineage spanning the Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, and Romantic eras (Burkholder et al., 2019), but the lineage of legitimate culture in China has taken a tortuous path in recent history. The high culture of the gentry class, such as Kunqu, fell along with the Qing empire (Mackerras, 1973). The old Republican government institutionalized the more recent Peking opera (Goldstein, 1999). Socialist China harshly persecuted both of those as “feudal” and “bourgeois,” glorifying instead revolutionary opera and Red music (Kraus, 2004). Thus, neither an enduring elite class nor a clear legitimate culture exists in China. If cultural capital

were to be relevant in China, an updated understanding of the development of cultural capital in China would be required.

This article explains how the tastes in cultural consumption rapidly “improved” in the new elites, and how the unique local social circumstances of China led to the rapid development of taste. The findings suggest that the combinations of economic inequality, fear of relative disadvantage, a single child policy, and the Chinese culture of emphasis on cultivation led to intense competition and the rapid rise in cultural capital within a generation. I demonstrate how Bourdieu's theory on cultural capital applies in a non-Western, post-socialist context, and explain the meaning of cultural capital in the Chinese context.

## 1.1 | Research design

This research shows that intergenerational inequality not only influences educational attainment (Wu, 2010), it also leaves imprints in embodied culture—values, preferences, and taste. Although cultural endowments are difficult to directly measure, they can be observed in social interactions through cultural consumption (Bourdieu, 1984). This study examines cultural capital through music taste, to examine how music attitudes and preferences differ among social groups, and the extent they might have diverged due to parental privileges.

Instead of a national comparison across China, where the cultural chasm between the urban and rural regions has been well researched (Kipnis, 2013; Lei, 2003; Sato & Shi, 2007), this study examines cultural differences *within* the richest megacities where social exclusion is actually practiced. Despite many years of living in the cities, migrants have been marginalized from mainstream culture and find it difficult to integrate into urban life (Sun, 2013; Xu & Xu, 2007; Yang et al., 2010). Cultural distinction from intergenerational inequality may offer an explanation. The interviews were conducted in Beijing and Shanghai—the megacities with the highest GDP per capita (US \$23,805 and \$22,799, compared to US \$10,276 nationally), the largest urban population (18.7 and 21.4 million), and the largest number of urban migrants (adding a total of 5.8 and 4.6 million, respectively, between 2005 and 2019) (NBS China, 2019, 2020).

To assess whether social background influences taste, research designs would typically suggest recruiting respondents by socioeconomic quotas. However, such research design may lead to a self-fulfilling outcome. Recruiting by social positions and suggesting the researcher is interested in the social hierarchy in a discussion on music might alienate some respondents and attract those more eager to showcase their “tastes.” Instead, this research recruits respondents neutrally for a study on everyday “music preference”—what music they like and why, without pre-screening or mentioning socioeconomic status upfront. The benefit of this setup is that by not prompting and leading respondents about social hierarchy, any discovered relationship between social position and taste will be unbiased.

Twenty-one interviews were conducted from Oct to Dec 2018, while I was based in a university in Beijing, which assisted me with finding respondents who are interested in sharing their music preferences. The interviews were conducted in the respondents' city, typically in a coffee shop convenient for the respondent, averaging about 1 hr but up to 2 hr long. The respondents typically refer to “highbrow” in Chinese as “*gaoya* (高雅),” which literally means “high” and “elegant.” All the interviewees discussed music as personal leisure and not professional judgment, with none of them working in the art or entertainment industries. The semi-structured interviews started with a discussion of their music interests, followed by how their interests developed, which traced to their past and their upbringing. The analysis examines the patterns in the interviewees' particular cases, which, informed by social developments in China, are evaluated against Bourdieu's theories—in search for explanations that link the individual cases with the wider macro-system (Burawoy, 1998). The analysis of interview notes and transcripts identifies a clear relationship between parental privilege, formative environment, and interest in Western culture and highbrow art.

## 1.2 | Respondent profile

The recruited respondents are raised under post-socialist China, with an age range of 23 to 44. Since they all live in the most affluent megacities in China, they are relatively well off compared to the national average. Their education ranges from a junior college to doctorate. Those with a bachelor's degree are in the top 6.6% of China, a masters' degree in the top 0.6%, and those with overseas education in the top 0.25% (NBS China, 2019, figure 2-14 and 21-10). None of the respondents is in manual labor occupations. Potentially less-privileged interviewees declined the interview in larger proportions, saying they are not interested enough in music to talk about it. This cultural disengagement of the lower classes is also observed in other countries (Bennett et al., 2009; Peterson, 1992; Savage, 2015). Likewise, none of the respondents is in what Goodman would classify as superelite families of the "ruling class" (2016). The lack of respondents on extreme edges of the spectrum is expected from the research design, which reveals that cultural distinction exists between non-manual workers in the megacities, based on their conditions of upbringing.

This research uses Bourdieu's conception of elites which specifically includes resources in culture (Bourdieu, 1984; Wacquant, 1993), as opposed to classical definitions that limit elites to the political or economic ruling class (Rahman Khan, 2012). The division between the new elites and non-elite respondents is not a sharp line but a gradient. The respondents are scored to provide a rough estimate of their cultural capital (see Table 1). In this research, the "new elites" are the new generation raised under a privileged upbringing—the first generation in modern China highly endowed with cultural capital. The "new elites" roughly refer to the top half of the respondents (CC5 to CC7), particularly the first quartile (CC6 and CC7). The new elites tend to have at least a parent who is a party member, an urban *hukou* (household registration) at birth, birth and upbringing in affluent Shanghai or Beijing, and high educational attainment—all of which are highly influenced by parental privilege.

The strong link between parental privilege, formative environment, and interest in Western culture and 'high-brow' art demonstrates the development of cultural capital and the rise of Bourdieusian new elites since post-socialism. I will make the argument by tracing the development of taste and cultural capital. The first generation of riches in contemporary China benefitted from the market reforms in the 1980 and 1990s, living a consumerist lifestyle when the majority of the population remain in rural areas, but they were homogeneously deprived of cultural capital (Chao & Myers, 1998). I will trace how inequality in the parental generation led to new elites' advantageous social positions and their unique taste for Western and highbrow music. The contribution of this research is that cultural distinction not only exists hypothetically—between people in rural and urban regions of China, or between extreme levels of the social hierarchy in different parts of China. Distinction is casually observable between the intergenerational cultural elites and the upwardly mobile in Chinese megacities.

## 2 | THE SHORTAGE OF CULTURAL CAPITAL IN THE FIRST GENERATION OF ELITES

The first generation of elites after Reform and Opening formed their habitus under the impoverished but highly egalitarian socialist society. In the period between 1949 and 1979, free market and private ownership were replaced by the *danwei* system—state-controlled work units which provided all benefits including pensions, insurance, housing, medical care, children's education, and recreational facilities (Andreas, 2016; Lu & Perry, 1997; Walder, 1986). Power rests in the few with political capital—the power to redistribute resources by the ruling party members (Andreas, 2016; Deng & Treiman, 1997; Djilas, 1959; Zhou et al., 1998). Society was also culturally more uniform compared to today, as the government limited consumption, tightly controlled media, and forbidden the import of cultural goods (Ho & Law, 2012, p. 403). This culminated in the Cultural Revolution, which purged remnants of bourgeois distinction in a series of radical political movements. The government sent many with higher education and in higher ranking professions into agricultural labor and suspended educational institutions

TABLE 1 Respondent profile

	Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Marital status	Current city	Education	Party parent	Urban Hukou at birth	BJ/SH Native	Western Edu	Cultural Capital Score*
1	Chenyue	34	F	Single	Beijing	Master	Y	Y	Y	Y	CC7
2	Xujing	44	F	Single	Shanghai	Master	Y	Y	Y	-	CC6
3	Yeqin	37	F	Married	Shanghai	MBA	-	Y	Y	Y	CC6
4	Wenju	29	F	Single	Beijing	Doctorate	Y	Y	-	Y	CC6
5	Yiyin	24	F	Single	Shanghai	Master	Y	Y	-	Y	CC6
6	Dingjiao	28	F	Single	Beijing	Master	Y	Y	-	Y	CC6
7	Ziguo	26	M	Single	Beijing	Master	Y	Y	-	-	CC5
8	Dongkun	23	M	Single	Beijing	Master	Y	Y	-	-	CC5
9	Xiaoshu	39	F	Single	Shanghai	Bachelor	Y	Y	Y	-	CC5
10	Changti	31	F	Single	Beijing	Master	Y	Y	-	-	CC5
11	Moliu	23	F	Single	Beijing	Master	-	Y	-	Y	CC5
12	Wumu	43	F	Married	Beijing	MBA	-	Y	-	Y	CC5
13	Muyao	32	M	Married	Beijing	Bachelor	-	Y	Y	-	CC4
14	Tianfan	35	M	Single	Beijing	Doctorate	-	Y	-	-	CC4
15	Donglu	31	F	Married	Beijing	Bachelor	Y	Y	-	-	CC4
16	Shiping	33	M	Married	Beijing	Bachelor	-	Y	-	-	CC3
17	Baoshang	31	F	Married	Shanghai	Master	-	-	-	-	CC3
18	Xiaojing	33	M	Married	Beijing	Bachelor	-	-	-	-	CC2
19	Zili	28	F	Single	Shanghai	College	-	Y	-	-	CC2
20	Puchao	26	M	Single	Beijing	College	-	-	-	-	CC1
21	Mining	23	F	Married	Shanghai	College	-	-	-	-	CC1

\*While cultural capital as a complex accumulation of privileged experiences is not readily quantifiable, a score is provided as a rough representation of the relative level of cultural privilege. The score is calculated from the sum of education (college = 1, bachelors = 2, masters or above = 3), at least a party member parent (Yes = 1), hukou at birth (Urban = 1), BJ/SH native (born and raised in Beijing or Shanghai = 1), and Western education (Yes = 1).

(Parish, 1984; Whyte, 1981, 2010, p. 21). Those who grew up in the generation before Reform and Opening are largely homogeneous in their impoverished material wealth and their limited cultural endowments.

Deng Xiaoping's economic reform starting in 1979 led to remarkable economic growth that lifted many people out of poverty. But by the late 1990s, China is regarded to have shifted to "wealth concentration" where wealth mostly consolidates among the elites (Xiang & Shen, 2009). The distribution of wealth has been increasingly unequal, concentrating wealth for those who established a privileged position early in the economic liberalization, including the political elites who are better able to convert political into an economic advantage (Davis & Wang, 2009; Sun & Guo, 2013; Whyte, 2010).

The widening of economic disparity led to a new wave of cultural distinction. The first decade of distinction was based on the objectified consumption of basic goods. Television, initially a luxury beyond the reach of most families at the onset of Reform and Opening, became common in main cities and was penetrating the rural by the 1990s (Li, 1991). The ownership of consumer durables was the first way for people to show off their achievement and status—famously the "four goods" of color televisions, washing machines, refrigerators, and stereos (Latham et al., 2006, p. 1). The distinction in material ownership swiftly upgraded from basic household appliances to electronics, motorcycles, then automobiles (Cartier, 2013, p. 36), spreading to the ownership of properties in increasingly expensive gated communities (Chen et al., 2019; Pow, 2012).

As the flow of entertainment and consumerism into China provided the cultural medium for distinction, the initial distinction based on material ownership soon enlarged to differences in lifestyles. First was the expansion of leisure activities, such as movie theaters, snooker, dancing, bowling, and dining out (Chao & Myers, 1998; Davis 2000, p. 20; Gan, 2000). Mobility also expanded for the rich, from the highly restricted family visits to Hong Kong and Macau in the 1980s to China becoming the highest outbound spenders in 2018 (Lee et al., 2013, pp. 21–22; World Tourism Organization, 2019). The rich were buying from imported supermarkets, gorging and wasting food in restaurants, and consuming exotic delicacies such as ostriches, snakes, and porcupines as symbols of diet-sophistication (Veeck & Burns, 2005; Zhan, 2005), while those in poverty were still deprived of basic material needs and suffering from malnutrition (Solinger, 2013, pp. 63–64). "If you want to be regarded as middle class, you must own and do these things, which, constructed as they may be, become objectified as hallmarks of the middle class" (Guo, 2008, p. 47). However, the distinction from material goods to lifestyles was still based on objectified cultural consumption, as differences in taste were limited.

As the new rich look for standards of proper fashion or taste, they look up to Western culture as symbols of modernity (Pun, 2005). Since much of the new lifestyle was introduced from foreign companies, foreignness was directly equated with modern taste (Bayne, 2006, p. 157). Urbanization, modernization, Westernization, and globalization became aspirations and symbols of distinction in Chinese cities (Ma, 2011; Tsang, 2014, p. 86). Scholars also point out that the aspirations for Western culture in China reflect "occidental" imaginaries of the West (Carrier, 1995; Chen, 2002). An example was the initial high status of fast-food restaurants in China. KFC and McDonald's opened in the most upscale parts of Beijing. Celebrated for their nutritious ingredients and scientific cooking, they became an attraction for the Chinese to have a taste of American culture (Croll, 2006, p. 32; Yan, 2000). Likewise, participation in "high culture" was initially dominated by the newly rich as a new fashion to be consumed. Scholars point out that high culture was being ruined by attempts of the uncultured new rich to profit from it (Wang, 2001, p. 86). The new rich in China were often labeled as *xingui* (the new elite), *xinfu* (new wealth), *dakuan* (big spender), and *baofahu* (parvenu: the unrefined rich people)—often derogatory terms to point out their recent wealth but lack of sophistication (Guo, 2008; Lei, 2003, p. 624; Miao, 2016, p. 24; Osburg, 2013, p. 11). Despite the efforts of the newly rich to distinguish themselves, their limited cultural capital restricted them to objectified distinction, often criticized as the conspicuous but poor tastes of the parvenus.

### 3 | THE EMERGENCE OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

Rising inequality in post-socialism provided the basis for the accumulation of cultural capital. Privileged parents compete in the provision of cultural endowments for their child so that they do not “lose at the starting line” (Tang, 2016). This competition for cultural capital is motivated by the competitive social environment in the current generation as well as the emphasis on children's education in Chinese culture.

Investing in children's development has a long history in China. It is a pragmatic path to gain upward social status, as well as a response to the fear of being stigmatized for lacking cultivation. “Tiger parents” and their heightened emphasis on children's education have been widely reported (Cheah et al., 2013; Wang, 2014; Xie & Li, 2018). This has roots in tradition judgments. Confucianism believes that to be fully human requires a lifelong process of self-cultivation, in order to achieve *ren* or the state of supreme virtue (Tu, 1985). Education, then, is also a path to gain respect from others (Miao, 2016, p. 24). The dominant discourse on cultivation in contemporary China is the development of *suzhi*—that is, internal qualities. Although originally conceived to encourage cultivation, in practice it is used as a label to “measure” and berate others for various deficiencies, such as poor education, hygiene, manners, or taste (Jacka, 2009; Kipnis, 2006; Murphy, 2004). Those with low *suzhi* are portrayed as needing further civilizing (Sun, 2008; Zhao, 2002). Scholars have criticized that the *suzhi* discourse reinforces and reproduces the social exclusion, as the underprivileged is blamed for their own failure to cultivate their intrinsic “quality” (Kipnis, 2006; Murphy, 2004). Ironically, there is little that the disadvantaged can do to “improve” their *suzhi*. It is privileged who are doing whatever they can to improve their and their children's *suzhi*. This is exacerbated by the one-child policy since 1979 that led two parents and four grandparents to devote all their resources and anxieties to the development of the “little emperor” or “empress” (Davis & Sensenbrenner, 2000, p. 59; Wang, 2009). Out of fear of relative deprivation, Chinese parents with newfound affluence did not hesitate to pour their resources into their children's development.

Drawing from the interviews, I will outline the mechanisms of how economic advantages in the parents led to the creation of cultural capital through new elites' personal narratives on their upbringing. The new elites typically had parents who were slightly more privileged, but these marginal advantages magnified as they continually pour resources into their child. Ultimately, advantaged parents are in a much better position to secure high educational attainment for their child, which converts into socioeconomic advantages. The new elites are also culturally exposed to foreign culture and highbrow culture, due to parental advantage as well as institutionalization through the education system. The linkage between the two makes their taste exclusive to those with intergenerational privilege—that is, cultural capital.

#### 3.1 | Securing advantages in educational attainment

The new elites have substantially higher educational attainment compared to their parents (also noted in Yang et al., 2021), which can be attributed to the substantial advantage they enjoy in the educational system (Wu, 2010). The education system in China is a series of funnels—getting into “key schools” at each level is a class sorter that funnels toward better life chances (Li et al., 2014; Woronov, 2013). Wealthy families can buy additional advantages for their children—extra tutoring lessons, enrolling in private schools, purchasing homes in certain schooling districts, and leveraging connections and donations to gain admission (Solinger, 2013; Zhao, 2015). Although the expansion of higher education in China increased the opportunity for higher education (Wan, 2006; Wang, 2014), enrolment has increasingly been dominated by privileged children, especially in the better-ranked universities (Hu & Wu, 2019; Liu et al., 2014; Niu et al., 2020).

Changti (CC5) was raised in a provincial capital and moved to Beijing for her university education. She observes that her elementary school classmates all came from average families, but after she entered a key middle school, her middle school classmates had privileged parents such as cadres, small business owners, and educated

professionals. Whereas her elementary school classmates mostly remained in the less affluent province, her classmates from the key school continued an upward trajectory and many ended up in Beijing like her. Likewise, Dingjiao (CC6) benefitted from parental resources in attending key schools throughout her schooling. "I had countless tutoring lessons as a child," she says. "My parents enrolled me in Mathematical Olympiad (a mathematical competition) and English lessons. I attended the best high school in my city through examination. But some students, around 50 to 80 students in 500, entered because of their rich parents." Key schools pave the path to high educational attainment and social positions, and parental advantages help place their children into key schools.

Furthermore, an education abroad remains an option for children from rich families. This is both a way to obtain the most prestigious credentials, but also a way to obtain higher education through a less competitive system (Kim, 2011; Waters, 2005, 2006). Chinese students are now the largest group of international students in countries with the highest ranked universities, including the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, and Japan (Institute of International Education, 2018). Foreign education is an expression of the parental agency to prepare their children for a globalizing world (Weenink, 2008), yet this agency only empowers those in affluent families (Lee et al., 2013, p. 27).

Seven of the new elites interviewed received a postgraduate degree abroad. "My parents long-planned for me to complete an education abroad, definitely so. My English learning was ahead of my peers. I enrolled in private English lessons since 4th grade, when English schools were just starting to be popular. We sat in a circle in small classes of 7 to 8 people, with a Western English teacher and a Chinese assistant who taught using imported foreign textbooks. Although my parents weren't superrich, they told me not to overstress for my high school entrance exam—'you can always study abroad if you don't score well'. They repeated again prior to my college entrance exam. But later my parents felt I was too young to move abroad at age 18," says Dingjiao (CC6). She continued her bachelor's education in China but obtained a postgraduate degree from a Russel Group university in the UK. The most privileged parents can afford to send their child abroad at younger ages. Chenyue (CC7), a native of Beijing, switched to a Western education track by moving to New Zealand in her second year of high school. In contrast, the underprivileged follow a standard educational track that poorly prepares them in English and in their entrance exams, which becomes a barrier in their prospects for higher education.

### 3.2 | A foreign oriented cultural environment

Affluent parents not only pave the path for their children's higher education which secures a higher social position, they also pamper their children with other cultural endowments. This study looks particularly at their interest in foreign and highbrow culture. The combination of parents' influence on culture and social outcome leads to the development of cultural capital in China—a culture unique to the elites.

The privileged parents well recognize the dominance of Western languages and cultural practices and hope their children can see the outside world (Miao, 2016, p. 114; Tsang, 2014, p. 85). The emphasis on the English fluency of the new elites is not only an advantage in the educational funnel and preparation for studying abroad. It also empowers them to be immersed in the foreign culture from an early age. The wealthy families had the earliest access to foreign media—installing satellite dishes and providing Internet access ahead of everyone else before they became mainstream enough to be outlawed or firewalled (Severin, 1994). Many of the interviewed new elites remember directly watching foreign stations such as HBOs (often through pirated satellite descramblers), as well as downloading an abundance of pirated foreign media such as movies, songs, and TV series in the early days of the Internet. Many of them were familiar with Western music and shows since a young age, watching American sitcoms such as *Friends* and plenty of American movies. Likewise, their families also afforded them legitimate items of foreign culture. Chenyue (CC7) remembers that when she was in kindergarten, her parents brought home a Russian vinyl player with classical music and foreign music. The vinyl age had already passed, making imported vinyl records rare collectables. Dingjiao (CC6) was able to go Xinhua bookstore weekly to buy legitimate copies



of cassettes, CDs, books, and magazines, such as the “Philharmonic” magazine that enriched her knowledge of classical music.

Their developing confidence in English gave agency to the new elites to directly consume foreign culture without barrier, opening them to a different world. This sharply contrasts with those in the general public, who had limited direct access to foreign media and whose consumption came much later—through the limited and censored voiceover works trickled through local channels (Rupke & Blank, 2009). Although imported foreign production has become increasingly accessible to the public, the new elites’ early and direct immersion in foreign culture allows them to be confident consumers of Western culture who research and selectively pursue what they prefer with critical eyes. The new elites often prefer Western culture over local popular culture, but their distinctive taste is perhaps most evident in their interest in “highbrow” culture.

### 3.3 | Instilling “highbrow” culture

The most widely consumed “highbrow” music among the interviewed intergenerational elites is Western classical, but it also includes other art forms that are consumed with a similar attitude. Those who enjoy theatrical music drama often mention Western musicals. Traditional Chinese operas are also sometimes mentioned, usually by those from inland regions or those with heavy influence from the older generation. Unlike elites in the West, Western opera is less mentioned by the Chinese new elites.

The “highbrow” taste of the new elites can be traced to their parents as well as institutionalization through the education system. Wealthy parents place importance on extra-curricular lessons such as calligraphy, martial arts, swimming, and music lessons (Davis & Sensenbrenner, 2000). Most of the interviewed new elites had parents who made them take lessons in music instruments—most likely the piano. The piano has long been held in high regard since its introduction to China in the 19th century—revered as the pillar of Western chordal music most distinct from traditional Chinese music, a status instrument of the wealthy that requires money and space (Kraus, 1989; Lau, 2008, pp. 94–97).

Music lesson is a sign of culture and affluence, as instrument and lessons are not easily afforded. Yeqin (CC5), who grew up in Shanghai, vividly recalls how her father had to save money to buy her a piano, and the memorable scene when he proudly carried it up the stairs with his friends—demonstrating the frugality and aspiration of the early middle class in the 1980s. Many of the new elites who now regularly attend Western classical concerts have similar memories of taking piano lessons and completing all the way to level 10, the highest level. Dingjiao (CC6) says her father made her take piano lessons when she was about 5 years old. She remembers that it was a Korean teacher who gave lessons through an interpreter—quite a fancy way to take music lessons. Many of the new elites have memories of the pressure from their tiger parents to practice and perform. They think that their parents, with insufficient knowledge of music, pressured them to pass exams as a way of gauging progression, as their parents see instrument playing as a competitive skill set more than leisure.

The privilege of attending live concerts or performances at an early age is another factor that establishes the habit of cultural participation in the new elites. The elites raised in the most developed cities have memories of parents bringing them to live events, as they were rare in the past and limited to the largest cities such as Beijing or Shanghai. They remember a variety of such events—Western symphony, ballets, and galas that included a variety of patriotic songs. For example, Yiyin (CC6) says her interest in theatrical musical drama started when she first saw a live Kunqu performance before high school. These childhood experiences left memorable imprints and sparked a lifelong interest in attending “highbrow” art forms.

The better quality of schooling of the elites is another factor that fostered their interest in Western and “highbrow” forms of art, which distanced them from the local pop music of the masses. Wenju (CC6) enrolled in private middle and high schools, the top two schools in her city, which differentiated themselves through a comprehensive development and interest-based learning instead of the rote-memorization and exam-focused education in typical

schools. She explains, "I first learned about musicals in my middle school. We also had art appreciation classes to improve our tastes. I had a very Westernized English teacher who played music and movies in class, explaining the stories behind each piece of work. I still remember watching the 'Cats' musical—which kindled my interest in Western theater. I also had dance lessons and learned Rumba, Cha-cha, Samba, and Waltz. In my classes, I listened to symphonies, learned about pieces, troupes, and identified instruments." Similarly, Dingjiao (CC6)'s high school introduced her to music appreciation. She still remembers how her teacher introduced her to the Italian opera *Turandot* by Giacomo Puccini, which aroused her lifelong interest in Western high culture.

The university further reinforced the barrier between "highbrow" and popular tastes. Many of the new elites attended top universities where general education classes promoted literacy in various "highbrow elegant art" forms (高雅艺术). The government has been inviting troupes to perform and teach appreciation courses in elite universities to promote cultural heritage among the young (Keane, 2013, pp. 140–143; Ong, 2020; Wong, 2009). University interest groups also built a community of students to learn and appreciate "highbrow" art. Ziguó (CC5) joined the college club where he learned about the costumes, makeup, singing, and gestures of traditional opera. Also, these cultural opportunities primarily benefit students who already had pre-established interests in those types of music in childhood. The new elites who joined university art appreciation classes have all been exposed to "highbrow" arts during childhood, whereas the non-elite respondents did not pick up such interests in their lower-ranked universities and remain primarily interested in mainstream pop. Educational institutions enlarged the differences in taste, as those opportunities for cultural "enrichment" primarily benefit those with prior interest and those admitted to top-ranking universities, both of which favor children from privileged families.

In contrast, people from less privileged backgrounds have been systematically excluded from the opportunity to engage with "highbrow" music. Puchao (CC1) grew up in rural China. The schools that Puchao attended lacked resources for holistic development and focused on memorization for exam prep, but ironically, students from such schools rarely have the opportunity to attend higher education. Compared to his peers, he had the marginal advantage of having a father who was once a village teacher. His father managed to pave the way for him to study in a top high school in the county-level city of his village. With top grades among his peers, he was extremely fortunate to be able to continue his education in a technical college. He eventually found work in the outskirts of Beijing, vastly outperforming his peers from similar social origins. Although he now lives in the same city as many of the new elites, his cultural upbringing sharply differs from the new elites described earlier.

Puchao: I did not have music lessons in middle school. I remember math, physics, and chemistry. Neither in high school nor college—no such thing as music class. In elementary school, my science teacher also taught me music. The teacher played songs through the cassette tapes. We learned the national anthem... and some red (Communist) songs. That was it.

Interviewer: Did you like your music classes?

Puchao: I barely remember them. I do not really feel anything about them, neither like nor dislike.

Compared to the new elites who had an abundance of interest in foreign culture, enthusiasm about music, and vivid memories of cultural lessons, the underprivileged lacked all of those. Puchao never learned any English songs in his schooling, and his English remains poor. "Highbrow" concerts were not available where he grew up, and his family could not have possibly afforded him private music lessons. Now he does not listen to any instrumentals, musicals, or operas, nor consume any foreign media. The pattern is similar for other upwardly mobile respondents from poor social origins. Despite their achievements in climbing the social ladder, social structure excluded them from cultural opportunities in the past, which marginalized them from the culture of the new elites in the present.

## 4 | COMPARING TASTE ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

This article described how the tastes of the elites developed from initial parvenu tastes of post-socialism to “highbrow” tastes in the new generation of elites. Although family interviews were not conducted with their parents or children, by comparing their descriptions of the tastes of their parents, their own tastes, as well as their expectations for their children, we can get a glimpse of the drastic changes in taste across the generation.

The differences in taste among the interviewees, concentrated in affluent Beijing or Shanghai, are larger than their parents who lived across different regions of China. Almost all the respondents had parents who were only modestly educated, typically no more than high school. Many of their parents had their education interrupted during the cultural revolution (1966–1977), and also could not have attended any “highbrow” performances in their upbringing. Their parents also had little music acumen and little knowledge of English. Interest in traditional “highbrow” opera was even farther away, mostly attributed to their grandparent generation. Although there were anecdotal stories on the influence of grandparents’ political capital on the upbringing of their parents, respondents’ descriptions of their parents’ music interests are consistent with existing research that points to the absence of elite culture in the general population.

In contrast, the development of taste is intensifying for the future generation of elites. While those with lower levels of cultural capital mentioned little cultural expectations for their children, those with mid-levels of cultural capital plan to heavily invest in their children’s “highbrow” development. Muyao (CC4) is a fan of rock and metal music. Although he admits to not understanding and not listening to Western classical or Chinese traditional music, he hopes his children will have “higher aspirations” than him and learn the “impressive” and “difficult” classical music. “Those who don’t work hard when young, are the ones who end up playing rock music (少壮不努力·长大玩摇滚),” he jokes self-deprecatingly.

The competition for cultural capital is becoming more intense and deliberate in the next generation. Wenju (CC6) says “My aunt in Beijing has a 12-year-old daughter. She and her husband are especially concerned about developing their child’s musical taste, intentionally playing symphony CDs at home and making her learn various instruments. Compared to my niece, my upbringing was less deliberate. No one purposely wanted me to learn this or that, or to listen to something, to purposely ensure that I have *gaoya qizhi* (highbrow temperaments). Now I see families in Beijing who deliberately want their child, especially daughters, to learn the piano, violin, and Western highbrow music, to make sure they develop elegant tastes.”

Yeqin (CC5) is particularly worried about the bad influence of popular music on her daughter. “There are many saliva songs (i.e., lowbrow pop songs) out there, which I don’t know how to appreciate,” she says, “I am quite worried about my child’s ability to discern and appreciate music.” Because she is already knowledgeable about the piano, she is making her 5-year-old daughter learn the same instrument so that she can directly teach her how to appreciate music. In response to her stressful experience in passing piano exams, she hopes her daughter can “enjoy the experience and develop a lifelong appreciation of music.” When she travels with her daughter, she tries to book Airbnb stays with a piano so that her daughter can continue to practice. “I hope music will become a part of her daily life. When she is having a bad day, she can play the piano or listen to music concerts,” Yeqin says. She deliberates whether her daughter should also learn the violin because it can be easily carried when they travel, to allow her daughter to practice. She brings her to summer music camps and live performances, exchanging their impressions afterward. She also dresses her daughter up when attending live performances to instill in her a “sense of ritual” during cultural participation.

The competition for cultural capital in China has been intensifying since post-socialism. The current generation of elites have parents who had little cultural capital and thus primarily invested economic capital into their children, a process that led to the formation of cultural capital. The elites of this generation, benefitting from the procession of some cultural capital, are much more deliberate in bestowing it to the next generation. Elite parents are now erecting an environment of upbringing to make the taste even more ingrained for their child.

## 5 | DISCUSSION—THE RISE OF CULTURAL CAPITAL IN CHINA

The article explained how intergenerational privileges led to the rise of taste distinction in Chinese society, leading to wide chasms in taste and social distinction based on taste. The narratives from the interviewees are remarkably consistent in the linkage between taste and privilege—those with high interest in Western culture and highbrow music inevitably trace a privileged upbringing that 1) inculcated foreign and highbrow cultural literacy, and 2) paved the way for high educational attainment. Although the Chinese context differs from Western societies, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital can be updated to explain the intergenerational transmission of cultural privilege in China's context.

An important factor in China is that various forms of capital have become highly convertible in China's post-socialist market economy, which allows different forms of advantage to be invested as cultural capital in the children. Scholars have found the salient convertibility of political capital into economic capital under the mutual collaboration between state and market (Bian & Logan, 1996; Davis & Wang, 2009; Goodman, 2008; Wang, 2008). This article has further shown how intergenerational economic and cultural capital advantages the child's education because China's institutional discriminations heavily favor those already more privileged. The highly unequal educational system allows privileged parents to secure key positions in the "education funnel" and ensure high educational attainments for their children, whereas opportunities are extremely competitive for those less privileged. The high level of education, particularly overseas education, in turn, contributes to high income and status, thus an advantaged social position for the child (Hauser & Xie, 2005).

China's unique cultural and social context is also conducive to the formation of cultural capital. The long culture of emphasis in education, rooted in Confucianism, and the single child policy all encouraged heavy investments into children's cultural development. Despite the relatively high social mobility contributed by the urbanization of the agricultural population, migrants have been disadvantaged in education quality, the opportunity for higher education, access to foreign media, and the opportunity for cultural development. Although an established legitimate culture did not exist, the competition for cultural capital allowed Western standards and past "highbrow" standards to quickly regain the patronage of the new elites. Elites' interest in selective but non-mainstream culture—culture that can be consumed with knowledge and effort—also finds outlets in those "highbrow" art forms.

The homology between social position and cultural taste is also established in China because both cultural and social positions are traced to parental advantages. The long preparations for a Western education created a unique, Western-oriented environment of upbringing—from language learning to cultural immersion and extra-curricular activities—resulting in the taste for classical music, operas, and musicals. Although such music is not *intrinsically* "highbrow," they have been socially constructed to be of high status in China. Not only are there educational requirements for appreciation (Gans, 1974, p. 95), its additional prerequisites—such as English fluency, music fluency, its introduction only in elite schools and universities, and the restricted opportunity to encounter them only in the largest cities or the best universities—erected boundaries against consumption by the underprivileged. Thus, the people with the taste for such music, and the people with high socioeconomic position, turn out to be the same group of people because both of those share the same cause—parental advantage. This homology establishes Western and "highbrow" culture as a cultural capital in China, because those tastes are unique to the group of elites with privileged upbringing.

Although this study examines from the angle of music, the cultural distinction is not only about highbrow music but generalizes to other aspects of culture, including English fluency and the international media consumption habits that were mentioned, as well as values and mindset that distinguishes those intergenerational elites. With continual urban migration, enlarging economic disparity, as well as intensifying competition for cultural capital in the next generation, the inequality from cultural capital in China deserves further research in the future.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## ORCID

Gordon C. Li  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1224-3512>

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