

The Consumption Practices and Identity Formation of the Chinese Middle Class in the Media Era

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During the past 40 years following the reform and opening-up policy of 1978, China's social structure has seen great changes, which include the birth and rapid development of the Chinese middle class as a derivative and consequence of modernization. They are the main source of consumption in contemporary China and display unique characteristics in their consumption practices. Consumption is not only a daily practice, but also a means of demonstrating and forming identity. In this media era, media play an important role in people's consumption practices and identity formation. In this study, semi-structured interviews were carried out with members of the Chinese middle class to study the relationship between consumption, identity, and media through their oral accounts. Moreover, problems, including the characteristics of middle-class consumption practices and how they use consumption to form identity, were analyzed. This study not only complements studies on the sociology of consumption of the Chinese middle class, but also is of great practical significance for deepening our understanding of the behavioral and ideological characteristics of the Chinese middle class.

Keywords: Chinese middle class, consumption, identity, media

Introduction

During the 40 years after the reform and opening-up policy of 1978, the social structure of China has seen great changes and social strata differentiate rapidly. With the continuous expansion of commercialization, urbanization, and industrialization; increase in the national income; popularization of higher education; and entrance of foreign-funded enterprises, a new class has emerged separate from traditional industrial workers and farmers. This new class consists of private business owners and self-employed workers; white collar workers in completely foreign-funded enterprises, Sino-foreign joint venture enterprises, and Sino-foreign cooperative ventures; management personnel in contracted or leased state-owned enterprises; senior management in the financial securities industry; professional intermediaries; senior technical professionals; and celebrities in the entertainment and sports industries. Defined by sociologists as the middle class, this new class, supported by the policies of the Chinese government, emerged gradually and developed rapidly as a consequence of modernization. In Western society, the formation and development of the middle class have experienced a long and continuous history of more than 200 years. Whereas in China, due to socialist transformation, land reform, and a series of class struggles before the reform and opening-up policy, the middle

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class was considered an object of scorn and even disappeared at one point. Therefore, the current Chinese middle class is China's first generation of a modern middle class.

According to studies by the Euromonitor International Company, the population of the Chinese middle class will reach 700 million by 2020, and its scale will continue to increase. As the backbone of social stratification, the middle class is the core strength needed to maintain social stability and the main consumption force in modern society, playing a significant role in expanding domestic demand and promoting economic development. Therefore, the formation and consumption characteristics of the middle class have attracted the attention of both domestic and foreign scholars.

According to traditional studies on consumption sociology, representative theories about the consumption characteristics of the middle class, including the Conspicuous Consumption Theory of Veblen (1899), the Fashion Consumption Theory of Simmel (1904), the People-Oriented Consumption Theory of David Riesman (1950), the Symbol Consumption Theory of Baudrillard (1968), and the Taste Distinction Theory of Bourdieu (1984), have provided explanations for the consumption behaviors of the middle class of Western countries in different eras and against different social contexts from perspectives including the motivation, psychology, pattern, social context, evolution, and development of consumption. Since 2000, studies on the middle class have been springing up in China. Many sociologists have also started to describe the characteristics and influences of the middle class, for example Li and Zhang (2000), based on data obtained in a survey in Chongqing in 1999, examined the spending proportions of the Chinese middle class and their consumption preferences in clothing, food, shelter, and transportation; Li (2007), on the basis of National Survey Data in 2001, proved the characteristic of the Chinese middle class in pursuing practicability and symbols of taste in terms of the consumption of food and clothing; Tian (2011) confirmed the consistency of consumption stratification and occupation stratification with data from the Chinese Social Survey in 2008; Wang and Zhang (2018) used the repeated design data from the China General Social Survey 2003 and 2013 to prove the preferences of the Chinese middle class in aspects including material consumption, cultural consumption, and leisure activities.

Both the representative theories in the West and quantitative analyses in China deem the middle class an already stable and static stratum, and consumption as a characteristic reflected by this stratum as a whole. In this study, however, we noted that as the first generation, the Chinese middle class consists of different members and is still in the process of evolution and development. Based on this basic understanding of the Chinese middle class, we believe that it must be seen as a stratum that is still taking shape and constantly changing, and its internal differences should be better understood. Before examining the overall consumption characteristics of the Chinese middle class, several basic questions should be clarified: "What does consumption mean to this stratum?", "How does this stratum use consumption to form identity?", and "What are the differences among consumption practices within the stratum?". To answer these questions, using only traditional quantitative analysis is not sufficient. Therefore, we decided to apply qualitative analysis in an effort to find answers from interviews with members of the Chinese middle class as defined by sociologists.

Consumption-Identity-Media

Being a common phenomenon in modern society, consumption is not only a daily practice, but also a self-presentation and performance. During the process of consumption, people often use tangible commodities and leisure activities as means of communicating their own social attributes and values to others, demonstrating

their identification with and ideas about individuals or groups. In modern consumer society, mass media play an important role in the process of identity formation as its impetus.

Up to the present, economists, anthropologists, and sociologists have put forward their own views and opinions on the relationship between consumption and identity. For example, in the field of economics, Frank (1985) divided commodities into positional goods and non-positional goods, and indicated that people's pursuit of social status will lead to their consumption of more positional goods. From an anthropological perspective, Sahlins (1976) believed that in modern consumer society, the symbolic value of material commodities has gone beyond their properties as objects to become a symbol for distinguishing social status and defining identity and group membership. Douglas and Isherwood (1979) studied material culture from the perspective of religious ritual, concluding that commodities are the source of information on social status, that consumption is a mark of social classification, and that people can express, define, and create their own identities through their consumption practices. In the field of sociology, according to Mills (1951), the symbolic nature of commodities encourages people to consume commodities that symbolize status, and this motivation to seek social status through consumption is especially obvious in urban areas. Featherstone (1990) also mentioned positional goods in his studies, and he believed that people obtain higher social status after they obtain positional goods.

After reviewing related economic, anthropological, and sociological theories, we discovered that all these studies underlined that commodities have not only practical value, but also symbolic value. According to these studies, the relationship between consumption and identity can be summed up as: Consumption reflects identity, and identity is demonstrated and realized through consumption. However, we believe that both consumption and identity are continuously evolving dynamic processes, and that their relationship is one of mutual formation and restriction. This means that consumption is an important means of forming identity, and that identity constrains consumption in return. People can highlight the uniqueness of their identities through consumption, thus forming "self-identity", or on the other hand, to blend into a group, they may also accept the constraints of identity during consumption to obtain "group identity". Without a doubt, the understanding of the mutual relationship between consumption and identity presented in this study will be solidified through specific surveys. Therefore, in this study, members of the Chinese middle class were interviewed directly to verify the relationship between consumption and identity.

In addition, we also believe that consumption requires media as an intermediary, because a consumer society is also a media society. In this media era, people cannot live without encountering media in their daily life, and we all consume various material and spiritual commodities through media. Consumption and media are mutually dependent and penetrative. People consume media and also learn methods and objects of consumption through media. This is to say, people, as the audience of media, are the consumers of media and potential consumers of the commodities advertised in media. To understand the relationship between media, consumption, and identity, we refer to Silverstone's (1994) discussion on media consumption.

Silverstone (1994) indicated that media consumption provides a basis for the confirmation and expression of identity, and its process consists of the following six segments: (1) commodification, which refers to the process of media creating commodities with symbolic significance through advertisements and introducing them to the market; (2) imagination, indicating that commodities are presented as objects of desire in media advertisements and the market in order to seduce consumers through the images, metaphors, and myths created by media; (3) appropriation, meaning that commodities, once sold, would be possessed by the consumer, separate themselves from the market and exchange, and become the possessions of individuals or a families,

thus gaining significance; (4) objectification, meaning that if appropriation reflects ownership of commodities, objectification displays commodities themselves and the identities of individuals or families; (5) incorporation, which means the ways that media or commodities are used, as both media and commodities are practical but can be used for other purposes as a result of consumers' considerations; and (6) conversion, being the indicator for measuring members of society and their cultural abilities, while commodities and their significance can be used to define and claim people's social status.

While studying Silverstone's discussion on media consumption, we confirmed the relationship between consumption, media, and identity and concluded that consumption is inseparable from media, and that consumers consume under the influence of media and express and form their identities through it. Based on this understanding of the relationship between consumption, media, and identity, special attention is paid to the media's influence on the middle class during the surveys.

Survey Method

The main survey method herein is semi-structured interviews. Before the interviews, the researchers defined only the key problems and the frame (see Appendix A) as references to guide the interview process. During interviews, the content and sequence of questions differed due to various uncertainties. In the interviews, researchers listened and responded to the interviewees' statements while modifying questions to help clarify or expand the content of interview.

This study included 25 interviewees (see Appendix B). Most of these interviewees were found by "snowballing" outward from researchers' personal connections in an effort to increase the diversity of interviewees in aspects including occupation, age, and life experience. Key criteria for the selection of interviewees were occupation and education indicators of the middle class as defined by sociologists (since most interviewees are not comfortable with questions regarding their income, a middle-class income indicator is not included in this study). As all the interviewees requested anonymity, their names were replaced with numbers to protect their privacy, following the ethical principles of sociological studies. However, all the interview records are true.

From May 2018 to February 2019, 25, members of the middle class from Beijing and Shanghai were interviewed. The interview locations were mainly the offices and meeting rooms of interviewees' companies, or somewhere near their homes, shopping malls, or cafés in frequently visited clubs. In Table 1, the basic characteristics of the interviewees are summarized as follows: The interviewees are aged between 25 and 63, there are 11 women and 14 men, most are married, most have received higher education, and nearly one third have experience studying or working abroad. To add diversity to the sample of respondents, two housewives were interviewed, both of whom have a bachelor's degree or higher.

Table 1

Sample Description

Characteristic	Distribution			
Gender	Male	56%	Female	44%
Age	25-63	Average	38.1	
Marital status	Married	84%	Unmarried	16%
Degree	Bachelor	44%	Master	48%
	Doctor	8%		

(Table 1 to be continued)

Occupation	Senior management	26%
	Middle-level management	12%
	General staff	49%
	Freelancer	6%
	Other	7%
Industry	Finance	8%
	Business	56%
	Education	8%
	Other	28%
	State-owned enterprise	4%
Nature of the employer	Private enterprise	44%
	Foreign-funded enterprise or joint venture	12%
	School	8%
	Public institution	16%
	Other	16%
Place of residence	Beijing	52%
	Shanghai	48%

Results and Discussion

According to their statements, interviewees are divided into the following three categories according to their characteristics:

The Material Attempts of Followers

Followers are middle-class individuals who are economically weaker and completely under the influence of media, trying to realize their identity through material consumption.

“Although my current income does not allow me to live the ideal life of the middle class displayed in the media, I hope to become a member of the middle class as described in the media as soon as possible. I usually go through fashion and lifestyle magazines and persist in my studying. Although my income is not high enough for me to buy a lot of luxuries, I follow the media’s recommendation to buy a less expensive luxury every two or three months, such as Gucci, Prada, and Coach, to get close to the ideal status materially.” (M02)

This kind of middle-class individuals not only are susceptible to the media, but also value the opinions of others. While consuming, they may sometimes act blindly and extremely.

“I like fashion magazines and American soap operas very much...I think in modern society, the contest among women is a contest for appearance and material possessions, and I do not want to be worse off. When I see my former schoolmates dressing fashionably, wearing exquisite makeups, bags, and watches, I think to myself that I will catch up with and exceed them. Of course, since my husband is the only one making money, I cannot just spend money on my wants. However, I do care about others’ opinions, so at least I cannot lose in appearances.” (M11)

“I always see people in the media who lead glamorous lives, and only those who have luxury cars and houses are the ideal middle class. I really hope that one day I can live a life like that. I thought that I could be rich as long as I saved a little bit. The result, however, is that others have bags from famous brands worth tens of thousands of yuan, while mine are counterfeits bought on Taobao. Luxury cars that can satisfy my vanity are beyond my means. You might find it ridiculous that I even thought of going for a “nude loan” (which requires

the borrower to provide pictures of himself holding his identity card naked, instead of a debit note), just for the simple reason that I want to show off although I am not financially competent.” (M18)

This type of middle-class individual, influenced by the media, also likes to try exotic commodities, and they take these attempts as symbols of internationalization and even a way for them to show off.

“It is often shown in the media that, to become middle class, you must have an international vision, with which I strongly agree. When I go out for food, I usually find some trendy, exotic restaurants on the Internet, including those that serve French food, Spanish food, Italian food, Arabic food, Turkish food, Korean food, Japanese Sushi, and Thai food. The owners and waiters at these restaurants are mostly foreign, and these places are less visited, being a paradise for the middle class. I do like this atmosphere, which is always seen in movies and TV shows. Although my income does not allow me to lead the ideal middleclass life displayed in the media, at least I can have a taste of it in respect of the atmosphere. Moreover, every time I eat foreign food, I can share it on WeChat Moments to show off. In this way, I can enjoy international style without going abroad.” (M16)

In addition to demonstrating their international style, this kind of middle-class individuals are also fond of highlighting uniqueness through customization. Customized products are costly, but for them they are means of demonstrating uniqueness and are ways of expressing themselves.

“It is said in the media that all the classy members of the middle class should pursue uniqueness, isn’t it? Customizing a suit is expensive. Considering design and production costs, it must be more expensive than those sold in shopping malls...but this method of consumption is trendy, isn’t it? Although I cannot customize every piece of clothing, it is possible to customize one item following the trend. Look, this handmade leather laptop bag is customized. Even more, I have customized handmade shoes, a watch, and a bicycle. I would rather tighten my belt to pay for my pursuit of uniqueness.” (M20)

Through consumption, these members of the middle class hope to conform with the group they want to identify with and distinguish themselves from the groups they look down upon.

“My friends are particular about brands when buying things. The bags they use are either HERMES or Prada. Being friends with them, I cannot be too plain. You know, birds of a feather flock together. Without a similar consumption level, we will not get close with each other. So, I am sensitive to recommendations in the media. I need to keep up with the people around me by owning brand-name products.” (M17)

“In terms of dressing up, I will refer to information in the media, imagining the temperament of the middle class, and learning what clothes to wear and how to wear them for different occasions. Now office workers like reading fashion magazines and wear brand-name clothes. We white collar workers also deserve these clothes, unlike those from rural areas and those with little education, who still look rustic even in famous brands.” (M25)

This kind of middle-class individuals value the visibility of their consumption, and be it clothes or a restaurant, they need their consumption practices to be seen. For them, this visible consumerism helps to demonstrate their social status. Invisible spending on daily supplies, on the other hand, is not as important. For example, “It doesn’t matter what you eat and wear casually at home. Nobody sees it anyway. For loungewear, I always buy the cheap ones”. (M24)

The Spiritual Pursuit of the Rationals

The Rationals indicate those members of the middle class with a stronger economic capacity than the Followers. Although their consumption practices are influenced by the media, they attach more importance to

spiritual consumption, and hope to be closer to their ideal lives through planned and rational consumption.

These kind of middle-class individuals think that “the middle-class life is not only about material satisfaction, but more of spiritual enjoyment (M10)”. They give consumption certain cultural meaning to show their taste, demonstrate their superiority, and distinguish themselves from other social strata.

“Recently, the media are all about coffee culture, which I think is a culture belonging to us as the middle class. I like going to stylish cafés. Instead of mass chain stores, I go to cafés that are only known to people in the same circle. I also went to one introduced to me by a friend.” (M03)

The café that M03 often goes to is CupOne in Beijing, the boss of which is from the art circle and used to work in the art gallery industry. The café is designed by Spanish designer Manuel Zornoza, and the per capita consumption is RMB 100 yuan. A waiter in CupOne proudly introduced the café in the following words: “Consumers of CupOne are mainly elite white-collar workers and freelancers who have a higher income and require a higher quality of life, namely the middle class. Other cafés sell coffee, but CupOne sells an atmosphere”.

M03 also mentioned that “Most of the Chinese middle class in tier-one cities have an atmosphere requirement, either business or leisure, for cafés. When they are in a public space surrounded by strangers of the same type, they will feel comfortable”.

Rational middle-class individuals also said that they cannot only learn about the lifestyle the middle class should lead, but also see the life of the upper class in daily life.

“The media is all about the image of the middle class, and they are everywhere in reality. Beijing is the top of the ivory tower for all fields, including politics, economy, and culture in China. Here the top elites from various fields gather, representing the highest class in Chinese society. Although I do not belong to the upper class, at least I am middle class. When I go out, basically I go to places filled with the middle class and the elite upper class, after all, the atmosphere there is better.” (M14)

“I like going to “S.T.A.Y. 思” Restaurant inside the Beijing Shangri-la Hotel with my friends. Consumers there are mostly middle class and above. You could say it is the best western seafood restaurant in Beijing, with a top-class environment and thoughtful service. That is the best choice to enjoy a nice time with your family on weekends and to talk freely with your friends.” (M07)

The “S.T.A.Y. 思” Restaurant mentioned by M07 is a French restaurant located on the first floor of the Beijing Shangri-la Hotel. It is a three-star Michelin restaurant created by French chef Annick Alléno. The per capita consumption there is RMB 1,000 yuan.

The Rational middle class also have clear plans for how to live an ideal life, for which they regularly set goals.

“I admit that I am deeply influenced by media. I feel excited every time I see a promotion or an advertisement in the media, which is a driving force for my struggle. When I fancy a commodity in an advertisement, I set a goal for myself, for example, I must buy it within two months. This is both efficient and planned.” (M19)

“I keep accounts everyday to know my income and expenditure situation, and have a rough expectation for my upcoming consumption. I do not think I can resist the power of media. While deferring to the media, I learn how to become a real member of the middle class. I think members of the middle class must have a brand-name bag and a pair of Christian Louboutin. You know, they are the symbols of identity. Certainly, handmade bags without logos are also noble because they are unique. Others’ opinions are important, but my own feeling is

also important.” (M12)

M12 mentioned brand consumption. For the Rational middle class, a brand is not only about demonstrating identity, but also about quality, insurance, and guarantee, as well as its cultural connotations. Their brand pursuits are within their means, unlike the reckless consumption of the Followers.

“I rarely go out to shop. If I do so, I would choose branded commodities because their quality is guaranteed, and their services are good. Also, these famous brands are rich in longstanding cultural concepts. For example, the culture of Apple is to keep innovating forever, while Huawei has a cultural connotation centered around strugglers, choosing them means that I agree with their culture and spirit.” (M05)

“The media tells me that the identity of the middle class must be demonstrated through certain brands. I also learn about brands from the media, such as Brioni, Armani, Ermenegildo Zegna, and Canali. Although the prices are a little high, they are quite decent to wear. My work is dealing with customers, so I must care about my image. I think the threshold for a brand is never the high price, but the outstanding quality. What supports your confidence is not a famous brand, but your taste.” (M13)

“Most of my monthly spending is on buying clothes and skin care products, mostly from international brands in duty free shops in airports. I think the quality of international brands is guaranteed. However, my consumption of branded products is always within my means. I buy them either in the duty-free shops or on sale in shopping malls.” (M01)

This kind of middle-class individual also attaches importance to the decoration, atmosphere, and glamour of their environment while consuming.

“When I go out with friends, we usually eat out. In places like western restaurants, the environment and service are good. When we finish eating, the table will be cleaned up. We can continue talking there or sit quietly, and there is not a waiter asking you to leave...I do not go to tea restaurants or cafés for the food, but for the decoration or the orchestra there. Of course, if the decoration and environment are good, the food will not be too bad.” (M09)

Members of the Rational middle class also mentioned their non-commodity spending on relationships and entertainment, and indicated that this helps them expand their social network.

“Relationship-based consumption can deepen affections and promote networking. On a monthly basis, I go out for dinner with my workmates, old schoolmates, and friends. This is an important way to expand my social network and strengthen social interactions. The places we go to are not only for food, but also for us to talk freely. Having dinner together, playing ball games, and singing Karaoke are helpful for promoting private affection and increasing job opportunities. I spend a lot on these things every month.” (M04)

The Freedom of the Confidants

The Confidants refer to those members of the middle class who are confident in their economic strength, maintain calm judgment against the promotion and advertisement in the media, and are capable of consuming freely.

“I think only a few people in China can lead the middle-class lifestyle described in the media. In reality, even though some people can afford that standard of living, they do not necessarily own all the things promoted in the media. People who are already middle class, like me, only buy one of two things recommended in the media rather than none at all, although we do refer to the media for how to improve our lifestyle. I use my own judgment for consumption.” (M08)

“The middle-class lifestyle displayed in the media is very different from reality. However, members of the

middle class like me already have enough confidence to avoid doing things literally as they are recommended by the media. Of course, I pursue a quality life and care about quality of life. I just do not imitate.” (M21)

This kind of middle-class individual seldom cares about the form of consumption, but pays attention to the essential content of consumption.

“I like swimming and often do so with my friends, but I do not want to join the fitness clubs recommended in the media. I know that these clubs are stylish, but I do not care about that. The most important thing is the fact that you do sports, not where you do them.” (M06)

“If not for work, I rarely eat in restaurants. It is never as nice outside as it is at home. Recently, I fell in love with cooking and would buy ingredients and cook at home by following recipes. I take this as a pastime. I like inviting friends to dinner at my home to try my cuisine, and, at the same time, it is more convenient and comfortable to chat at home.” (M22)

“A lot of my friends value comfort and quality when buying clothes, which might be expensive, but not excessively expensive. They no longer pursue big international names. The most important thing is being comfortable.” (M23)

Except spending on basic necessities, maintaining their physical and mental health and improving their children’s accomplishments and education through study are also essential consumer items for members of this section of the middle class.

“Now, the expenditure is still concentrated in investing in houses, updating electronic products, networking, traveling, self-education, and education of children. Although food and clothes are important, the content of them are different from that in the past in our family. We are demanding in terms of the quality and services of food and clothes. For example, we tend to buy organic food, requiring it to be environmentally friendly and not harmful to our health. For clothes, we prefer comfort but will not ignore brand and style. Every year, our family travels abroad two or three times. Educational investment in sending our children to learn foreign languages, piano, ballet, and swimming, as well as spending on my foreign language studies, make up a large proportion of our spending.” (M15)

Conclusion

In conclusion, through the interviews herein, we discovered that different types of individuals within the Chinese middle class showed different characteristics in their consumption practices.

Firstly, those members of the middle class defined as the followers in this study do not have enough money to lead the middle-class lifestyle promoted in the media, but they try to learn and consult promotions and advertisements in the media in an effort to demonstrate their middle-class identity through material consumption. They not only pursue symbols of internationalization, but are also keen on customized products, think highly of visible consumption, and sometimes even blindly consume commodities beyond their means. Their consumption is meant to be materially in line with the group they want to identity with and to distinguish them from the groups they look down upon.

Secondly, when compared to the followers, those members of the middle class defined as the Rationals in this study have stronger economic strength, a superior quality of life, and broader vision. They not only learn about the required lifestyle of the middle class from the media, but also directly observe the lives of the upper class in their daily lives. They think that the middle-class lifestyle promoted in the media is both material and spiritual. They have clear plans for their consumption and value the cultural connotation, service quality, and,

especially, the environment of the things they consume. Their non-commodity spending on relationships and entertainment is quite high. They tend to express their taste, demonstrate their superiority, and differentiate themselves from other strata through consumption.

Finally, the Confidents were defined in this study as the group with the strongest economic background. They pay more attention to the content, rather than the form, of consumption. They purposefully refer to and choose from promotions and advertisements in the media. They have stable consumption preferences and spend a lot on education, study, and recreation. Their consumption practices show that they are confident in their identity.

In sum, for the Chinese middle class, a stratum that is taking shape and constantly changing, consumption plays an important role in realizing, expressing, and forming identity. In this media era, the consumption practices and identity formation of the middle class are inseparable from media's influence. Due to different economic strengths, living environments, and visions, different kinds of individuals within the Chinese middle class hold different attitudes towards the media and show marked differences in their consumption practices. However, although there are numerous market research reports on the consumption characteristics of the Chinese middle class, almost all of them highlight the overall characteristics of the Chinese middle class, including quality, conspicuousness, brand, and fashion, but rarely mention consumption differences within the middle class. Therefore, we hope that future market research and related studies can properly subdivide consumption characteristics, distinguish the differences within the middle class, maintain a developing perspective, closely follow the changes in the middle class over time, and investigate the behaviors and consciousness of the Chinese middle class from multiple aspects.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

I. Basic information and middle-class consciousness

- (1) Could you talk about the basic information about and experience of you and your family (age, degree, occupation, employer, family composition, etc.)?
- (2) What is your industry and your job? (If you are not working, would you please describe your former job?)
- (3) Based on your current conditions, including job, income, degree, housing, and family, which class do you think are you in? Which class do you think are most people around you are in?
- (4) What kind of people do you think can be called middle class in China (income, degree, occupation, consumption, lifestyle, etc.)? Do you think that the middle class has emerged in China? Do you think you are a member of the middle class? Why? What is the rough proportion of the middle class to the total population in China?
- (5) What is your ideal middle class like? Personally speaking, which aspects should be improved to achieve an ideal middle-class status (income, degree, occupation, lifestyle, etc.)?

II. Exposure to and use of media

- (1) How long are you exposed to the media every day? Which media do you use most frequently (Internet, television, newspaper, movie, etc.)? What do you usually use media for (work, study, networking, entertainment, education, etc.)?
- (2) Have you noticed reports and descriptions of the middle class in the media? If yes, what is your impression of it, and how do you evaluate reports and descriptions of the media's image of the middle class?
- (3) Do you think that you are vulnerable to the influence of media? In which aspects are you influenced? If a product or service is promoted to you or your family in the media, will you or your family consume it due to the media's influence?

III. Family or individual consumption

- (1) For your daily consumption, where do you usually go shopping? Do you have any preferences in where you shop? Why do you make choices like this?
- (2) Do you have favorite brands for your daily necessities, clothes, cosmetics, cars, luxuries, and so on? Do you have preferences for certain brands? Do you care about others' opinions on the brands you use? Do you use international brand-name commodities? Why do you choose these international brands?
- (3) Do you go shopping aimlessly? What factors do you consider while shopping? Why?
- (4) If you see a commodity you like but the price is beyond your means, will you buy it? Do you buy commodities on sale?
- (5) What do you think is the main purpose of consumption? How do you think your concept of consumption has changed in recent years? Do you think that changes in this concept of consumption are influenced by external factors?
- (6) In the last year, on what category do you spend the most money (clothing, food, shelter, transportation, leisure activities, recreations, etc.)?

Appendix B: Overview of Interviewees

SN	Gender	Age	Employer-occupation	Degree	Place of residence	Marital status
M01	Female	38	Market research company—researcher	Bachelor	Shanghai	Married
M02	Female	34	Advertisement company—designer	Bachelor	Beijing	Married
M03	Male	35	IT company—engineer	Master	Beijing	Married
M04	Male	25	Newspaper office—journalist	Bachelor	Shanghai	Unmarried
M05	Male	46	Municipal government—officer	Master	Shanghai	Married
M06	Male	46	Five-star hotel—general manager	Master	Beijing	Married
M07	Male	43	TV station—department head	Master	Beijing	Married
M08	Female	45	Private company—CEO	Master	Beijing	Married

M09	Male	45	Securities company—consultant	Master	Shanghai	Married
M10	Male	36	University—researcher	Doctor	Beijing	Married
M11	Female	36	Housewife	Bachelor	Beijing	Married
M12	Female	37	Foreign-funded company—department manager	Master	Beijing	Married
M13	Male	48	Insurance company—department head	Bachelor	Shanghai	Married
M14	Male	39	Private company—general manager	Master	Beijing	Married
M15	Male	43	State-owned company—project manager	Bachelor	Beijing	Married
M16	Male	27	Property developer—designer	Master	Shanghai	Unmarried
M17	Female	36	Real estate agency—department manager	Bachelor	Beijing	Married
M18	Female	28	Middle schoolteacher	Bachelor	Shanghai	Unmarried
M19	Female	28	housewife	Master	Shanghai	Married
M20	Male	41	Foreign-funded company—human resource manager	Master	Shanghai	Married
M21	Female	44	Advertisement company—owner	Master	Beijing	Married
M22	Male	30	Freelancer—online editor	Bachelor	Shanghai	Unmarried
M23	Male	63	Central administrative authorities—minister	Doctor	Beijing	Married
M24	Female	29	Foreign-funded company—staff	Bachelor	Shanghai	Married
M25	Female	31	Bank—staff	Bachelor	Shanghai	Married

Note. Ages shown in the table are ages at the time of the final interview in February 2019.