

Leisure & Travel as Class Signifier: Distinction Practices of China's New Rich

Abstract

Along with its open-door policy and economic reforms, wealth accumulation in China has experienced tremendous growth in a short time. Notably, a group of new rich has emerged in the process of wealth and social reconfiguration. Being rich creates tremendous possibilities for individuals to tailor their leisure activities and lifestyles. Situating individuals' travel in the overall spectrum of leisure, this study explores the distinction practices adopted by China's new rich at leisure sites. Phenomenological interviews were conducted with 29 China's High Net Wealth individuals. The findings discover the spectrum of highbrow–lowbrow tastes occurring at leisure sites with three patterns of leisure constructions: conspicuous waste, conspicuous taste, and lifestyle. Supplementing Veblen and Bourdieu's traditions, the study further deepens scholars' comprehension of social distinction in tourism academia.

KEYWORDS: Elite Consumption, China's Rich, Social Distinction, Habitus, Taste

1 **1. INTRODUCTION**

2 China's four decades of reform since 1978 has induced profound changes in its social
3 stratification and wealth accumulation. China is now estimated to be home to 11,070 individuals
4 with investable assets of over US\$30 million (Wealth-X, 2014). Furthermore, in mid-2015,
5 approximately 9,555 residents had investable assets of over US\$50 million in mainland China,
6 ranking second in the world (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2015). In 2016, 198 newcomers
7 were included on *Forbes'* rich list, 70 of whom were from China. Further, 320 of the total 1,810
8 billionaires on the list were from China, accounting for approximately 18% of the world's ultra-
9 rich (Forbes, 2016). The country's total combined wealth of US\$107.4 billion places it ahead of
10 the United States.

11 In consumer culture, being rich is the prerequisite for acquiring myriad luxury commodities
12 and pleasures. The greater an individual's wealth, the greater his or her potential to construct a
13 luxury lifestyle and seek a wide array of experiences (Featherstone, 2010). According to Veblen
14 (1899), leisure can be viewed as a symbolic arena in which members of the "leisure class"
15 showcase their superior social position through lavish consumption of visible products. Simmel
16 (1957) pointed out a trickle-down effect wherein novel products and activities are first
17 introduced and adopted by the rich before being disseminated throughout society. In this sense,
18 the rich establish status-based standards to which everyone else are compared. It is therefore
19 unsurprising to see that the luxury market in leisure and tourism has quickly expanded to include
20 the middle classes over the past 20 years, a trend described as the democratization of luxury
21 (Featherstone, 2010).

22 In travel research, status-seeking is an umbrella motivation that grounds travelers' actions
23 (Correia & Kozak, 2012). However, tourists' unwillingness to admit prestige motives (Riley,

1 1988) and unawareness of prestige as a real reason for travel (Tiefenbacjer, Day, & Walton,
2 2000) have led to a paucity of studies examining social distinction in the tourism context
3 (Correia & Moital, 2009). As a broad continuum, leisure encompasses tourism at one end (Ryan,
4 1997), where tourists' behaviors are largely influenced by their leisure practices in residual
5 environments (Carr, 2002). This study suggests that individuals' prestige motives should be
6 situated in a wider recreational picture wherein social distinction and status are conferred more
7 naturally. While leisure lifestyle embraces tourism as one aspect, the increasing diversity in
8 travel patterns (for example, special interest tourism) fits nicely into a wide spectrum of leisure
9 pursuits in post-modern society (Trauer, 2006). Leisure interests, therefore, should be better
10 addressed to inform the emerging travel consumption patterns of certain groups.

11 Most studies have revealed that travelers may seek social distinction through conspicuous
12 consumption (e.g., Correia, Kozak, & Reis, 2016; Hyun & Han, 2015). However, changes in
13 late-modern society have rendered Veblen's idea of conspicuous consumption problematic to the
14 elite. Shipman (2004) described the dynamic process of how the rich have moved from
15 conspicuous ground to more subtly inconspicuous ground. The elite now have multiple avenues
16 through which to communicate their status. Purchasing expensive goods may be a conventional
17 norm, routine, or lifestyle (e.g., Dwyer, 2009; Biggart & Beamish, 2003). Recognizing the role
18 of inconspicuous habits contributes to a nuanced understanding of the rich's stratifying practices.
19 A broader scope stems from the conception of *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1984) that is thought
20 to operate outside of personal consciousness.

21 Cultural capital is a worthwhile framework to study the rich. It explores the dimension of
22 inconspicuous consumption in social distinction, which is largely neglected by existing research.
23 Furthermore, it helps generate the spectrum of highbrow–lowbrow tastes occurring in leisure and

1 travel field. Nevertheless, limited attention has been given to cultural capital in tourism and
2 leisure research. Several tourism scholars have used part of Bourdieu's findings to account for
3 different themes including sense of place (Campelo et al., 2014), gastronomy (Lee, Scott, &
4 Packer, 2015) and tourism authenticity (Zhu, 2012). However, by appropriating only part of
5 Bourdieu's theoretical paradigm and systematical methods, these studies may bypass the central
6 preconditions for studying cultural capital and habitus. First, instead of divergent interests,
7 Bourdieu's (1984) used taste to mainly examine the topic of social distinction in individuals'
8 consumption field. Second, social distinction in Bourdieu's sense should not be discussed via a
9 single notion staying at concept level, but a framework together with a series of necessary
10 concepts including habitus, cultural capital and taste. To enhance the knowledge of social
11 distinction in leisure and travel research, the following literature review will revolve around:
12 conspicuous distinction and to what extent does it hold to the emerging China's rich;
13 inconspicuous distinction wherein habitus, cultural capital and taste come into play, and
14 construction of leisure and its possible philosophical roots which can be aligned with Bourdieu's
15 theoretical paradigm.

16

1 **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

2 **2.1 RICH LEISURE TODAY**

3 The rich continue to consume luxury commodities and seek unique leisure experiences
4 worldwide (Featherstone, 2010; Roberts, 1999). For instance, the most common types of
5 business jets owned by China’s ultra high net worth individuals (UHNWIs) are Gulfstream G550
6 and Dassault Falcon 7X, which cost approximately US\$60 million (Hurun Research Institute,
7 2015). Luxury pursuits can also be represented by exotic and authentic travel experiences like a
8 South African safari, an adventure cruise in the polar region, or fine dining at the top of the
9 world’s highest tower (Park & Reisinger, 2009). From a functionalist perspective, leisure is
10 considered an essential aspect of social order: the wealthy elite have access to exclusive leisure
11 products and experiences, which contributes to the normal operation of social systems (Rojek,
12 1995).

13 Veblen’s (1899) notion of *conspicuous leisure* is central to understanding the relationship
14 between stratification and leisure practices through a functionalist lens. Written in America a
15 century ago, Veblen’s (1899) theory of the leisure class proposed an evolution in the wealthy
16 population who had been relieved from menial work while controlling the social surplus
17 produced by the working class. US society at that time was in the midst of a transition to mass
18 consumption and had begun to produce social surplus (VomBruck, 2005). The leisure class thus
19 emerged along with the accumulation of personal wealth. Veblen identified two leisure groups
20 under these conditions: the long-established aristocratic families who inherited old money over
21 centuries, and the nouveaux rich who had recently accumulated property through efficient
22 production. The question of how to transform newly gained wealth into social status comparable
23 to aristocracy became a critical issue for the nouveaux rich. To transform personal wealth into

1 social elitism, the leisure class needed to put wealth on display for other members of society to
2 see. Veblen named two approaches the leisure class leveraged to conspicuously signal their
3 wealth: partaking in exclusive leisure activities by wasting time and partaking in ostentatious
4 consumption by wasting money.

5 As society developed, communities were becoming increasingly diversified and mobile.
6 People tended to be less informed about the activities in which others participated. Veblen
7 remarked that conspicuous consumption preceded ostentatious leisure activities as a means of
8 showcasing social status. According to Veblen, conspicuous consumption refers to the act of
9 purchasing luxury goods and services in excess to advertise one's privileged social status. The
10 working class often had limited access to expensive goods and services, which created
11 exclusivity for the leisure class. Moreover, the leisure class downplayed the practical value of
12 goods while wasting money extravagantly as "a mark of prowess and perquisite of human
13 dignity" (Veblen, 1899, 69).

14 Since Veblen, conspicuous consumption has been widely discussed in the social distinction
15 of leisure and tourism practices. Leisure theorists have noted that conspicuous consumption
16 influences individuals' leisure choices and behaviors, further signifying social prestige and self-
17 identity (Huang & Wang, 2018; Wearing & Wearing, 2000). As a key subset of leisure, the
18 search for status through travel is also endless. In tourism, conspicuous consumption is closely
19 tied to bandwagon and snob effects immanent in travelers' need for social prestige (Correia &
20 Kozak, 2012; Correia, Kozak, & Reis, 2016; Roos, 2017). This motive and lifestyle affect
21 tourism system in every respect ranging from destination selection to the emergence of new
22 tourists (Rocha, Rocha, & Rocha, 2016). This is also the reason why recent studies in tourism
23 field started to investigate the effect of status-seeking behaviors on particular tourism segment

1 such as luxury tourism (Yang & Mattila, 2017) and premium restaurant experiences (Lee, Jang,
2 Kim, Choi, & Ham, 2019).

3 However, an important issue to examine is the extent to which Veblen's views remain
4 applicable to the rich today. Veblen's detractors have noted the wealthy are not a homogeneous
5 entity (Mills, 1956); being rich in financial capital does not necessarily reflect richness in
6 cultural and social capital, nor does the consumption of expensive goods correlate with a rise in
7 status. For the experienced rich, leisure practices such as purchasing luxury goods can be a
8 conventional norm, routine, habit, and standard of living (Dwyer, 2009; Biggart & Beamish,
9 2003). With these notions in mind, Bourdieu's (1984) views on taste and cultural capital offer an
10 alternative perspective on elite distinction at leisure sites.

11

12 **2.2 Highbrow Taste or Lowbrow Taste?**

13 Taste, in Bourdieu's (1984) opinion, was a socially constructed facet differentiating high
14 culture from low culture in multiple domains including food, vacations, clothing, home décor,
15 reading, and so on. Different classes possessed distinct tastes informed by habitus. *Habitus*
16 denotes an internalized system or "modality of action" (Camic, 1986, 1046) that structures
17 individuals' expectations, propensities, responses, and actions within a social context. Class-
18 specific habitus drives the unique tastes of different classes. According to Bourdieu, each class
19 has a specific habitus that is amassed by cultural capital. The elite class, with its high volume of
20 cultural capital, has a habitually differential capacity given members' highbrow tastes across
21 various fields. Although taste is a concept that is evolving and contextually dependent (Prieur &
22 Savage, 2013), highbrow taste refers specifically to the choices and behaviors exhibited by

1 society's upper echelon, namely those who possess greater economic and cultural capital
2 (Hooker, 1934). In contrast, those born into the working class may be largely influenced by
3 working-class lifestyles and leisure pursuits, believing they will likely remain in the working
4 class. This disposition is then externalized into daily preferences and practices, collectively
5 creating working-class tastes (Dumais, 2002).

6 In this regard, Bourdieu offered a more nuanced look at how elites differentiate themselves
7 by displaying habitually highbrow taste and rejecting tastes preferred by lower classes (Turner &
8 Edmunds, 2002). In the leisure field, taste is manifested in leisure pursuits and construction. For
9 example, elites with highbrow taste may naturally understand the proper repertoire of leisure
10 conduct: how to behave at the dinner table, how to dress appropriately, and the types of
11 recreational activities that reflect refined aesthetic criteria (Rojek, 2000). This understanding is
12 amassed through pertinent capital resources including economic, social, and cultural capital.
13 These three forms of capital are mutually influential and acquired in early childhood as well as
14 during later life stages. Unlike economic and social capital, cultural capital is perceived as being
15 more difficult to access and plays a crucial role in social agents' distinction (Holt, 1998; Prieur &
16 Savage, 2013). Bourdieu (1984) further identified three types of cultural capital: an embodied
17 form, internalized in individuals' dispositions; an objectified form, represented in cultural goods;
18 and an institutionalized form, manifested in an official diploma.

19 *Philosophical Underpinnings of Bourdieu*

20 Bourdieu considered himself a structuralist-constructivist in an effort to transcend the
21 theoretical conflict between functionalism and structuralism (Mahar, Harker, & Wilkes, 1990).
22 By structuralism, Bourdieu believed that there exist social structures which are free from social
23 agents' consciousness and capable of guiding and limiting agents' daily practices. By

1 constructivism, Bourdieu admitted that individuals' perceptions and action are the products of
2 social interactions. Moreover, people do have the capabilities of comprehending and
3 accumulating experiences for future actions (Bourdieu, 1989). In the theoretical vernacular,
4 Bourdieu believed that social structures exert significant influence on individuals' experiential
5 contexts (e.g., the three forms of *cultural capital*). On the other hand, *habitus* is an evolving
6 concept that changes along with the accumulation of capital. Individuals have the ability to
7 comprehend and acquire experiences that will affect future actions (Bourdieu, 1984). In this
8 sense, Bourdieu's explanations provide leisure theorists with ontological and epistemological
9 assumptions applicable to functionalism and structuralism.

10 Especially, Bourdieu's position of structuralist-constructivism sets a context for a
11 hermeneutic analysis of the symbolic participation and personal meanings that social agents
12 might exhibit when constructing personal position in the field of leisure and travel consumption.
13 Under the tenet of phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology also deals with meaning-
14 making process of social agents' life experiences (Lavery, 2003). However, the paradigmatic
15 premise of hermeneutics resides in both sides of structure (in parallel with Bourdieu's
16 structuralism) and agency (in parallel with Bourdieu's constructivism) (Thompson, 1997;
17 Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). Noted by Heidegger, meaning construction should be "the situated
18 meaning of a human in the world" (Lavery, 2003: 24). That is, what's termed as historicity by
19 Heidegger or primary habitus by Bourdieu, namely individuals' fore-structure and fore-having,
20 are the key to shape social agents' experiences and interpretations (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010).

21 Yet little research has used Bourdieu's conceptualization to study taste dynamics in the
22 leisure and tourism field. In the consumption field, elite classes have exhibited highbrow taste by
23 choosing products and means of consumption commensurate with their aesthetic standards and

1 class positions (Emmison, 2003). Elites tend to consume intellectually demanding topics rather
2 than those that provide immediate amusement, such as novels and movies (Holt, 1998). The
3 wealthy also seek meaning and quality in interior decoration rather than focusing on the size of
4 their personal residence (Üstüner & Holt, 2010), and they prefer to appreciate commodities from
5 a more expansive geographic scope instead of locally (Prieur & Savage, 2011).

6 As a relatively abstract concept, taste takes different forms in different contexts. The
7 preference for avant-garde poetry, for instance, in Bourdieu's days was always linked to
8 highbrow culture as it required specific literary knowledge of history and poetry. However, in
9 modern times the avant-garde poetry may already become common material in text book. Even
10 different society like China may exist without French avant-garde poetry (Prieur, Rosenlund, &
11 Skjott-Larsen, 2008). In China's context, the aesthetic tastes are closely intertwined with Chinese
12 traditional culture and philosophies (Tang, 2016). Such cultural backgrounds breed certain
13 indigenous concepts including mianzi (face), guanxi (networks), renqing (others' favor), which
14 significantly shape tastes dynamics in Chinese consumerism (Zhang, 2018). Highbrow tastes
15 versus lowbrow tastes are therefore continually evolving, signifying practices that are largely
16 dependent on the field of study (Prieur & Savage, 2011). Thus, it is important to examine forms
17 of cultural capital in different fields.

18 In leisure contexts, even when acknowledging Veblen's conspicuous consumption in social
19 differentiation at leisure sites, scarce literature has explored the concepts of habitus, taste, or
20 cultural capital. A few exceptions (Wynne, 1990; Lash & Urry, 1987) did refer to Bourdieu when
21 investigating distinction strategies in the middle and working classes; however, highbrow taste
22 was framed as belonging to society's upper echelon (Hooker, 1934). As such, to understand taste
23 dynamics in the leisure field, it is tempting to review the upper class's leisure choices and

1 practices of distinguishing themselves. This paper aims to explore multiple aspects of social
2 differentiation of China's rich at leisure sites to identify tastes manifested in the leisure field,
3 namely by comparing leisure construction and practices valued by the rich possessing high
4 cultural capital, moderate cultural capital, and low cultural capital.

6 **3. METHODOLOGY**

7 This study intends to apply Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital in the leisure field; thus, the
8 research lens is consistent with Bourdieu's theoretical position. Bourdieu intended to transcend
9 the theoretical opposition between structuralism and constructivism and further established a
10 dialectical dualism between social agency and structure (Mahar, Harker, & Wilkes 1990).

11 Reflecting on specific concepts, Bourdieu considered habitus as "durable, transposable
12 dispositions" and "structuring structures" (Bourdieu, 1990, 53). As the durable disposition,
13 habitus operates beyond individuals' control and is largely shaped by dispositions or social
14 origins. As a structuring structure, habitus is an ongoing process that offers individuals
15 opportunities to acquire specific cultural resources later in life (Jackson, 2008).

16 Given Bourdieu's framework, this study takes a hermeneutic phenomenological approach,
17 suggesting that individuals' personal understandings should be interpreted within their social and
18 cultural contexts (Heidegger, 1962). That is, the meaning of self-experiences is historically and
19 socially structured (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). Moreover, this philosophical strand acknowledges
20 that individuals' pre-understanding and background is indispensable for meaning-making
21 (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994). Hermeneutics therefore arrives at the same point as
22 Bourdieu's structuralist-constructivism: cultural capital is largely accumulated from an

1 individual's primary disposition (pre-understanding) while also being constructed by his or her
2 subjective learning. Accordingly, the current study situated participants' own leisure
3 constructions within their generic cultural backgrounds.

4 For the researchers, interview data served to elicit a deeper understanding of intangible
5 human-related phenomena from individuals' direct narratives (Van Manen, 1997). Importantly,
6 Thompson (1997) posited that long or phenomenological interviews address the core interests of
7 a hermeneutic framework. The present study consisted of 29 face-to-face phenomenological
8 interviews ranging from 40 minutes to 2 hours. To facilitate participants' storytelling of their
9 leisure constructions, interviews included two sections: general leisure styles (e.g., leisure
10 experiences, preferences, motivation, and changes accompanying wealth accumulation); and
11 perceptions of specific leisure experiences and moments (e.g., leisure impacts, understandings,
12 and future intentions).

13 A purposive and snowball sampling approach was employed. With a target population of
14 China's rich, personal wealth level was the key criterion. The threshold was individual investable
15 wealth above US\$ 1 million, the most common criterion to identify high net worth individuals
16 (HNWI) in industry wealth reports. UHNWIs with investable wealth above US\$ 30 million were
17 also purposely sampled because one's wealth level and duration of being rich may affect leisure
18 experiences. Using the first author's three rich friends as gatekeepers, 29 tape-recorded
19 interviews were completed. The respondent numbers were decided when the data was
20 phenomenologically saturated (Wassler & Kirillova, 2019). In current analysis, the saturation is
21 not only reflected in the relatively even number of participants under different cultural capital
22 categories (between 8 to 10 informants), but also in the contrasted leisure constructions across
23 categories.

1 Efforts were made to sample informants from various demographic backgrounds so
2 researchers could frame each interpretation within a specific cultural backdrop. Participants were
3 provisionally categorized into groups with high cultural capital (HCC), moderate cultural capital
4 (MCC), and low cultural capital (LCC). The operationalization of cultural capital was: (father's
5 occupation + education)/2 + personal occupation + education, which follows the mature score
6 system developed by Holt (1998). Such scoring system follows Bourdieu's formulation of
7 cultural capital resources directly since it conflates three sources of cultural endowment
8 including individual's social origin measured by father's occupation and education, respondent's
9 formal education and occupation (Moisio, Arnould, & Gentry, 2013). In consumer research, this
10 rating scheme has been widely used to categorize consumers into different cultural capital
11 groupings (e.g., Arsel & Bean, 2012; Friedman, 2011; Moisio, Arnould, & Gentry, 2013;
12 Üstüner & Holt, 2010). These pre-set groups per se are without any explanatory power, instead,
13 they indicate "the most salient divisions in capital resources" (Friedman, 2011, 369). Moreover,
14 consistent with Bourdieu's philosophical position and the hermeneutic phenomenology, this
15 score system identifies respondent's fore-structure before an agentic interpretation of leisure and
16 tourism consumption.

17 However, this scoring system was modified slightly to fit China's specific contextual traits.
18 Much of China's relative ruling power belongs to individuals who are political members working
19 for the Party (Bian, 2002); thus, political occupations such as cadre and soldier appeared when
20 exploring participants' upbringings. The final five-point occupational scale was adapted combining
21 the original scoring system and China's own work-unit status (see Buckley, 1999). Additionally,
22 the grandfather's occupation was also added to this scheme because China's Cultural Revolution
23 turned most interviewees' fathers into peasants and workers (Evans & Donald, 1999). Notably,

1 mother's cultural capital profile is neither included in the original rating scheme in Western
2 societies nor in current study of a Chinese context given the distinctive masculine culture in class
3 reproduction (Ishida, Muller, & Ridge, 1995). In the same vein, education scale was also adapted
4 from the original rating scheme whilst calibrating to China own education characteristics.
5 Therefore, the final cultural capital score scheme for this study was: (father's education +
6 occupation + grandfather's occupation)/3 + occupation+ education (see Table 1).

7 *Insert Table 1 here*

8
9 The hermeneutic approach does not prescribe standard rules for data analysis (Pernecky &
10 Jamal, 2010), but some theoretical accounts (Van Manen, 1997; Ricoeur, 1981) serve as practical
11 guidance for data interpretation. Ricoeur (1981) essentially emphasized the hermeneutic circle in
12 data interpretation, wherein an iterative process is required between the part (i.e., meaning units)
13 and the whole (i.e., comprehensive understanding). As an extension of Ricoeur's (1981) work,
14 Lindseth and Norberg (2004) developed a three-step evaluative process consisting of naïve
15 understanding, structural analysis, and comprehensive understanding. This study followed
16 Lindseth and Norberg's (2004) model to analyze data. Step 1 involved open reading of the entire
17 transcript several times to offer spontaneous interpretation. Step 2 was focused on meaning
18 instance or narrative structures to validate naïve understanding, including thematic analysis to
19 identify textual structures; the whole transcript was divided into different meaning units. In Step
20 3, comprehensive readings were conducted by rereading the text with meaning units and naïve
21 interpretation in mind. This holistic process was circular between the sense of the whole (i.e.,
22 initial understanding) and part of the whole (meaning units) (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander,

1 1994). For example, if the meaning units elicited in Step 2 invalidated the initial reading, the
2 whole transcript was read again and a new naïve understanding was offered.

3 As hermeneutic research focuses on interpretation and individuals' sociocultural effects on
4 said interpretation, the researcher's position must be disclosed (Barclay, 1992). Authors in this
5 study were engaged in self-reflexivity during data interpretation; they completed reflection
6 memos on the emergence of meaning structures, changes in naïve understanding, and
7 information gleaned from interview observations. Furthermore, the two authors discussed
8 structural themes together to ensure consistent findings. To approach a hermeneutic analysis and
9 align with the operationalization of cultural capital, the researchers also carefully reviewed each
10 transcript while considering respondents' socioeconomic factors.

11

12 **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

13 **LCCs: Conspicuous Waste**

14 **Naïve Reading**

15 Findings revealed that the amount of money spent during leisure time, along with the types
16 of activities in which LCCs were involved, directly reflected their social position. Leisure
17 perceptions described by LCCs were more activity-based and closely associated with luxury
18 experiences, including “yachting”, “shopping abroad”, “cruises”, “traveling”, and “car
19 collection.” Notably, these activities were favored for their conspicuous and symbolic functions
20 rather than for purely utilitarian value. That is, the activities were tied to social identity and gave
21 meaning to personal status.

22

1 **Structural Explication**

2 ***Materialism***

3 The narratives indicated that LCCs often indulged in luxury products and services during
4 their leisure time, thereby sending conspicuous signals of material distance from the mass
5 population. LCCs' narratives about their leisure experiences naturally conveyed certain material
6 symbols with "the most", "expensive", "largest", and "exclusive" as high-frequency prefixes. I26
7 described how he acquired unique travel experiences throughout his leisure history:

8 *"I have been to 80 countries, which I am sure nobody can compete with. I used to pass seven*
9 *airports within one day. Travel is my favorite leisure activity. My rule is to select the most*
10 *expensive hotel, Michelin restaurant, and the most iconic attractions via VIP tickets. I know it*
11 *sounds exaggerated, but you must admit these keep you safe from mass tourists who quarrel in*
12 *budget hotels and crowd the night markets."*

13 Interviewer: *What is your most impressive travel experience?*

14 *"I visited an undeveloped island in Cambodia. It was a historical palace surrounded by forests.*
15 *The local government hadn't opened it for tourists yet. I went there through a private bank. They*
16 *delivered me by helicopter and gave me one security guard. I can't remember any details about*
17 *that palace, but I will never forget the experience. No tourists have ever before stepped foot on*
18 *that island—I was the first!"* (I26)

19 I26 couldn't remember the characteristics of places he had visited but clearly recalled "80
20 countries", "seven airports", "helicopter", and "the first one." This number-driven description
21 was a sign of his material superiority. Similar narratives were found in I27's ability to buy three
22 different Audi vehicle models within one month. He was also pleased to invite friends to visit his

1 “car gallery” on weekends.

2 ***“Face”-conscious***

3 Although I27 did not mention his opinions about driving luxury cars, I18 specifically
4 explained how it felt to drive high-end vehicles:

5 *“One of my leisure pastimes is driving cars. When I drive my Porsche, many pedestrians will*
6 *give me a second glance. Especially when dating a girl, driving a fancy car increases affection.*
7 *So updating my cars to the latest edition is a must.”* (I18)

8 Driving a fancy car contributed to I18’s sense of superiority; the interviewee did not discuss
9 the car’s practical utility but rather its symbolism due to its high-end status. Besides driving,
10 I19’s penchant for shopping signified that leisure activities did not only provide him fundamental
11 physical and physiological joyfulness but also admiration from friends:

12 *“I love shopping abroad. My English is poor, which makes me embarrassed occasionally. But*
13 *still, I only shop abroad as they have the most updated editions of mega fashion brands. I feel*
14 *good when friends ask me where to buy the same bag. You know in Chinese, we call it ‘gaining*
15 *face.’”* (I19)

16 Much like car collection for I27, I19 showed keen interest in being the earliest adopter of
17 new fashion items. Most LCCs devoted extreme effort to acquiring certain products in their
18 leisure time. When the interviewer asked I19 whether his friends used the same items as him, he
19 replied, *“Yes, some items are doomed to be the must-have of the year. I mean, they become*
20 *standard that you should use it.”*

21 **Comprehensive Understanding**

22 Most LCCs in the current study became rich somewhat later than MCCs and HCCs; they

1 were acculturated in less-educated and lower-income households where material constraints were
2 previously an everyday focus (Bourdieu, 1984). Gaining wealth in later stages of life brought
3 money but not necessarily the ability to spend it. Central to leisure sites, leisure patterns became
4 a way of emulating the established rich and enhancing self-status (West, 1982). Accordingly,
5 LCCs' distinction strategies of showing off material acquisitions and being face-conscious
6 reinforced Veblen's (1899) idea of conspicuous waste.

7

8 **MCCs: Conspicuous Taste**

9 **Naïve Reading**

10 MCCs emphasized the functionality of leisure. They interpreted leisure as a period of
11 functional time to develop good tastes and enhance their personal networks. Most MCCs cited
12 "personal taste" in their interviews. Leisure for them was not purely discretionary; they took
13 maximum advantage of leisure to refine their personal tastes on an artistic and intellectual level.
14 Attending EMBA, collecting art and wine, and travelling abroad were major trends among
15 MCCs. However, a closer look at MCCs' narratives and field memos demonstrated that their
16 knowledge of art and wine remained superficial. Their passion for engaging in intellectual
17 pastimes stemmed from imitating their friends.

18 **Structural Explication**

19 *Artsy-fartsy*

20 Researchers in this study had the chance to interview participants in either public cafés or
21 informants' homes or offices. Besides MCCs' own narratives, field memos taken during
22 interviews suggested that respondents' office and home decorations were typified by artistic

1 designs, which contrasted sharply with LCCs' large and ornate office spaces. Bookshelves,
2 paintings, porcelains, tea tables, and even wine cellars were commonplace. For example, I15
3 drank tea with the interviewer in his office:

4 *“One of my current pastimes is tea tasting. It is an emerging hobby recently in my city. As a*
5 *northern city, we preferred Chinese Baijiu before. I used to drink Chinese Baijiu. However, my*
6 *business partners from southern China usually drink tea, and they regard this hobby as a*
7 *cultural tradition. Recently, I decided to develop this hobby, which I consider more decent than*
8 *Baijiu...” (I15)*

9 I15 believed tea tasting to be more “decent” than Chinese Baijiu but failed to introduce the
10 differences among his several tea collections in terms of background, mouthfeel, and brewing
11 process. This omission was similar to that of I10, who had many blue-and-white porcelain pieces
12 in his office but ignored their history and aesthetic meanings; he simply used “number of years”
13 as the criterion to judge a piece’s inherent value. I12 offered detailed reasons for MCCs’
14 enthusiasm for artistic pursuits. He led the interviewer into his wine cellar and discussed his own
15 understanding of leisure:

16 *“My parents were farmers, and I started to work at 17. Luckily, I got rich quickly at 20 years old.*
17 *Looking back, the biggest change was the improvement in my personal tastes.”*

18 Interviewer: *How is personal taste manifested in leisure?*

19 *“When I was 20, I dressed myself with all the visible logos: Chanel belt, Dior bag, Burberry*
20 *coat... Until one day my friend reminded me that too many logos confused people. By the way,*
21 *most of my friends are second-generation rich; I’m the only one in our network who started from*
22 *scratch. Then I began to learn from them about dressing. I learnt that their suits are customized*

1 *in worldwide boutique shops without visible brands. But to go one step further, I made my own*
2 *cuff-links from jadeite...My friends liked them and even asked me where I bought them.”*

3 Interviewer: *How about your wine cellar?*

4 *“Same as dressing. I collected almost all the vintage wines from Premier Grand Cru. I am*
5 *already familiar with wine knowledge. Whatever brand my friends want to buy, they ask me first.*
6 *They claim I am the one who has a higher level of personal taste.” (I12)*

7 I12 showed the interviewer almost every type of wine but conceded that he did not drink
8 wine very often, as he got drunk easily. But he contended that having a wine cellar in his office
9 made him a cultured person.

10 ***Referential understanding***

11 Another characteristic of I12’s narratives was that he picked up most of his leisure hobbies
12 from friends’ suggestions. This referential reception was reflected in other MCCs’ interpretations
13 as well. I16 and I17 each discussed their reliance on key opinion leaders (KOLs) when selecting
14 destinations and hotels. I16 recounted her trip to Bali:

15 *“Travel is my leisure habit. Unlike others who travel through high-end agencies, I travel*
16 *independently.”*

17 Interviewer: *How do you decide which destinations to visit?*

18 *“On Microblog, I follow many travel experts who post their trips on their blogs. I follow their*
19 *suggestions, and I think travel should be unique. I went to one hotel in Bali recommended by*
20 *KOLs. Each hotel room was a tree house! I think my friends who go via agents cannot get this*
21 *kind of information.” (I16)*

1 MCCs tended to consider KOLs to be industry connoisseurs and perceived this referential
2 reception as a status-maker, unlike LCCs who spent generously on travel but did not have
3 equally unique experiences. MCCs' referential perspectives were also represented by their
4 understandings of leisure pursuits. For instance, I16 used KOLs' ideas to describe the hotel
5 experience in Bali rather than her own feelings.

6 **Comprehensive Understanding**

7 Unlike social upstart elites (LCCs) who attempted to enhance their status through
8 ostentatious expenditures, MCCs realized that social distinction led to multiple ends. Today,
9 increasing people are becoming affluent and capable of purchasing a broader range of
10 commodities (Mason, 1998). "The middle class could now emulate the rich in dress and even in
11 automobiles, especially as the rich downsize to Volvos" (Canterbery, 1998, 148). MCCs in this
12 study had been rich for longer than LCCs and had changed their perspective on leisure to shift to
13 less ostentatious yet more sophisticated displays of wealth. Many scholars have argued that
14 LCCs lack the culture necessary to earn the acceptance of the upper class (Elias, 1978; Shipman,
15 2004). Cultural integration has therefore become a key factor leveraged by the upper echelon to
16 distinguish themselves from others. Interestingly, however, MCCs' cultural integration appeared
17 to remain at an external and deliberate level.

18

19 **HCCs: Lifestyle**

20 **Naïve Reading**

21 Contrasting sharply with LCCs and MCCs, HCCs required no instrumental justification for
22 their leisure construction. The most frequently mentioned words in these interviews were

1 “unplanned”, “freedom”, “lifestyle”, and “inner peace.” HCCs’ perceived meaning of leisure
2 focused on its intrinsic nature and subjective dimensions. Similar to MCCs, HCCs were actively
3 involved in artistic activities, reading, travel, and exercise. They regarded these pastimes as
4 indispensable to their personal lifestyles and highlighted the rewarding feelings that leisure
5 provides.

6 **Structural Explication**

7 *Aesthetically conscious*

8 HCCs also exhibited artistic pursuits related to leisure construction. Different from MCCs,
9 HCCs displayed aesthetic sensibilities and an abstract understanding of their leisure pursuits. I7
10 shared his interpretations of his art collection:

11 *“I like collecting Chinese Celadons. Most of them date back to the Song Dynasty. For me, people*
12 *in the Song Dynasty enjoyed a most leisured life and had the most aesthetic perspective.*
13 *Collecting these Celadons is a way to communicate with the ancients.” (I7)*

14 Unlike I10 (MCC), who judged artwork only by its “number of years”, I7 collected Chinese
15 porcelain out of his own aesthetic understanding. Additionally, some HCCs perceived leisure as
16 intrinsically rewarding or even as a spiritual pursuit marked by freedom. I3 mentioned
17 meditation:

18 *“Leisure means to spot the beauty in the world. I usually do Zen Meditation... When I started, I*
19 *would give up all secular thoughts and only focus on my own breath. Breathe in, breathe out ...*
20 *These concentrative efforts give me chances to talk to my inner soul. To me, the freedom brought*
21 *out by meditation is beautiful.” (I3)*

22 I7 engaged in meditation for its own sake, which allowed him to focus on the core of his

1 own being without worrying about worldly distractions. HCCs' aesthetic capabilities seemed to
2 be more or less influenced by Chinese culture. Inspired by Taoism and Chinese poetry, I2 shared
3 that his future leisure intention is to have a country cottage in a secluded place where no external
4 and secular matters can disturb him. Leisure for HCCs was therefore akin to a container carrying
5 relative freedom far from external forces and schedules. HCCs' basic aesthetic criteria for leisure
6 included pursuits that were personally pleasing and intuitively worthwhile with a focus on
7 Chinese culture.

8 ***Critical understanding***

9 Different from MCCs' referential perceptions, HCCs demonstrated confidence in judging
10 and engaging in leisure practices through critical thinking. Taking destination choice as an
11 example, HCCs developed their own selection methods, contrasting sharply with MCCs who
12 cited KOLs' opinions. I9 revealed museum visits as his major travel motivation:

13 *“Travel is my leisure. Specifically, traveling to worldwide museums is my leisure...I won't get*
14 *tired of flying two days to visit a museum and won't get tired of looking at only one piece for two*
15 *hours in one museum.”*

16 Interviewer: *Which museum do you like the most? Why?*

17 *“Actually many...Greece National Archaeological Museum, Russia State Hermitage Museum,*
18 *Beijing Palace Museum, etc....But I don't like British museums. I want to see how one piece of*
19 *work represents local culture. Apparently most items in British museums are from other*
20 *countries...You can say it is an epitome of human history, but for me, the match between local*
21 *culture and the local museum is more important.” (I9)*

22 I6 also offered his opinion on special-interest attractions. Some MCCs and LCCs disliked

1 attractions related to dark tourism and avoided visiting them; however, I6 happily partook in
2 these visits, explaining, “*It is a form of tourism. You are visiting lived history...dark tourism is a*
3 *historical statement.*”

4 **Comprehensive Understanding**

5 In Bourdieu’s (1984) analysis, HCCs’ status symbols were not related to material scarcity
6 but rather the implied cultural capability to understand the consumed objects. At leisure sites,
7 HCCs downplayed the conspicuous display of material goods. Leisure sites for them are not a
8 competition but an unintended result of the expression of cultural capital through their aesthetic
9 and critical constructions of leisure. As I1 mentioned, “*The understanding of leisure is connected*
10 *to all aspects of life. How you appreciate beauty in the leisure field is how you project your*
11 *lifestyle.*” In fact, leisure as a lifestyle marked by freedom has been discussed by many theorists:
12 “the conception of leisure as offering freedom and autonomy for intrinsically directed self-
13 development remains an important one for many leisure theorists, because it points to the
14 opportunity which leisure gives for the expression and nurturing of higher human values”
15 (Haywood, Kew, & Bramham, 1995, 8).

16

17 **5. DISCUSSION**

18 Changes in social status, such as the passage from parvenus to patricians, occur incessantly
19 in many emerging nations. Reflecting the purchasing power of the new rich in the global market,
20 some studies have examined status consumption of “new consumers” in emerging markets
21 (Üstüner & Holt, 2010; Kravets & Sandikci, 2014). Looking beyond Veblen’s conspicuous
22 consumption, certain studies from other fields have applied a nuanced understanding of

1 Bourdieu's taste dynamics in explaining this new class's consumption patterns (Arsel & Bean,
2 2013); however, taste dichotomies related to leisure sites remain unexplored. By systematically
3 utilizing Bourdieu's tradition, this study confirms the role of habitus in the rich's distinction
4 practices at leisure and travel sites. Importantly, this operationalization of habitus allows this
5 article as the first attempt to generate the forms of tastes occurred in leisure field. The current
6 study contributes to existing scholarship about these concepts. Out of Veblen and Bourdieu's
7 traditions, Interestingly, conspicuous taste emerged as a new finding which contributes to extant
8 academia on the taste dynamics among the emerging rich in a developing country.

9 **5.1 Theoretical and Managerial Implications**

10 China's rich demonstrated myriad distinction practices at leisure sites. These stratifying
11 practices embrace travel as one avenue through which LCCs and MCCs emphasize materialism
12 and flashy displays of wealth, whereas HCCs focus more often on idealism and critical
13 understanding. Through survey items or interviews, previous research has widely treated
14 tourists' prestige motive directly by asking respondents if the trip brings social status.
15 Respondents' reluctance or unawareness to acknowledge the real motive to travel pose
16 challenges in studying social distinction (Correia & Moital, 2009). With tourism consumption
17 patterns becoming increasingly divergent and complex in late-modern society, Trauer (2006)
18 accentuated the linkages between travel characteristics and leisure interests which may share
19 common values include special interests/hobbies, aesthetic connoisseurship and self-
20 enhancement. By framing distinction practices into individuals' socio-cultural background, it is
21 clear to understand to which group travel can be regarded as a status symbol conspicuously; to
22 which group travel is a professed love of cultural integration deliberately; whilst to which group
23 travel blends in inconspicuous distinction which requires high-level of aesthetic and critical

1 thinking. Current findings provide a foundation for future research to study social distinction and
2 prestige motives in tourism settings. Future studies are suggested to approach tourism distinction
3 under travelers' social-cultural contexts and recreational pictures.

4 Furthermore, this study supplements the research in the strand of distinction by studying
5 the group who establishes status-based standards to which everyone else are compared. Based on
6 the trickle-down effect (Simmel, 1957), upper class's behaviors yesterday becomes daily
7 practices of the masses tomorrow. In this respect, this study helps forecast future trends in
8 China's mass tourism and leisure behaviors. Future attempts are encouraged to compare
9 distinction practices of upper class with middle class or working class to understand specific
10 trickle effects in travel behaviors, that is rather than trickle down, to which extent do trickle up
11 and trickle around (see Trigg, 2001) apply in travel research.

12 Importantly, this study advances the Western theories of social distinction in a developing
13 country. For a leisure-oriented field in an emerging context, social distinction among the upper
14 class enriches the original distinction practices of Veblen's (1899) conspicuous waste and
15 Bourdieu's (1984) taste. A transitional stage of conspicuous taste, bridging both Veblen and
16 Bourdieu, is revealed in current research. That is, upper affluent tourists in an emerging economy
17 are becoming increasingly sophisticated than expected. No longer confined to a display of
18 material exclusivity and rarity for signifying social standing, new rich are shifting to intellectual
19 and cultural activities which demands subsequent knowledge and cultivation (Shipman, 2004).
20 However, their overly revealing quests without apprehension about the intrinsic value of the
21 products consumed still stays at a conspicuousness level of taste rather than the unintended level
22 of class-based taste posited by Bourdieu (1984). This finding, therefore, expands the existing

1 knowledge of social distinction practices used by the emerging affluent in leisure and tourism
2 consumption.

3 For managerial perspectives, industry reports tend to place rich groups into a single basket
4 under the assumption that the rich exhibit homogeneous behaviors and use the same distinction
5 strategies. For China's rich in particular, media coverage (Besser, Hichens, & Christodoulou,
6 2015) indicates that the rich model an American Gatsby lifestyle that parallels Veblen's
7 pecuniary waste. However, being rich does not necessarily mean one is an experienced consumer
8 who possesses high cultural capital. Buying positional commodities can be a social instrument
9 for the newly rich but a complete lifestyle for aristocrats. A further market segmentation is
10 needed for luxury tourism marketers and leisure providers to provide the right products to right
11 customers. The application of taste spectrum from current study will help industrial sectors
12 embed differentiated status symbols in the travel product design.

13 **5.2 Limitations**

14 Despite the above implications, this research is subject to several limitations. Firstly,
15 hermeneutic analysis in current study suggests a co-construction between respondent and
16 researcher throughout the process of data analysis and interpretation (Wassler & Kirillova,
17 2019). Therefore, this study recognizes the alternative data interpretations from other scholars
18 departing from different theoretical traditions. Second, the sample size is relatively small
19 although the content is phenomenologically saturated after 19 interviews. Nevertheless, findings
20 of current study cannot be generalized to the whole population of the rich given that China is
21 famous for its invisible rich (Wang, 2012) who are not shortlisted in this exploratory research.
22 The present study targets at a specific cohort of wealthy people in China. Thus, caution is needed
23 when applying the taste classifications revealed in this research to middle class or to rich groups

1 from other countries. Future attempts are advisable to apply the way of taste conceptualizations
2 in current study to other class layers such as middle class or mass class to expand our knowledge
3 about social distinction in tourism and leisure consumption. Lastly, a number of studies indicated
4 that Bourdieu's framework has hidden certain important sociocultural index, namely, gender and
5 ethnicity (Bennett et al, 2009). In leisure and tourism research, women are oftentimes regarded
6 as taste-maker considering their social reproduction role at home (Smith, 1979). This opens up
7 new vistas for future studies to conduct comparative research on cultural capital and gender
8 differences.

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Table 1: Profiles of Interviewees

Participant (age)	Father's occupation	Father's education	Grandfather's occupation	Occupation	Education	Score of Cultural Capital	Wealth Level (USD Million)
HCC							
I1(37)	Entrepreneur (L)*	Bachelor	Cadre (L)*	Entrepreneur (L)	Master (Bachelor from elite university)	13	> 600
I2(39)	Engineer	High School	Farmer	Entrepreneur (M)*	Master	9	>200
I3(42)	High-school Teacher	College	Farmer	High-level Executive	PhD	11	>100
I4(39)	Entrepreneur (L)	Primary School	Farmer	Entrepreneur (L)	PhD	10.7	> 400
I5(36)	Entrepreneur (L)	Bachelor	Soldier	Entrepreneur (L)	Bachelor from elite university	12.3	> 300
I6(27)	Entrepreneur (L)	PhD	Farmer	Entrepreneur (L)	Master	11.3	> 400
I7(31)	Entrepreneur (L)	High School	Farmer	Entrepreneur (L)	Master	10	>400
I8(37)	Entrepreneur (L)	High School	Farmer	Entrepreneur (L)	Master	9.7	>400
I9(35)	Entrepreneur (L)	Bachelor	University Professor	Entrepreneur (L)	Master (Bachelor from elite university)	12.7	>300
MCC							
I10(36)	Cadre (S)*	Middle School	Farmer	Entrepreneur (M)	EMBA	8.67	>100
I11(32)	Restaurant Owner	Primary School	Farmer	Entrepreneur (M)	Bachelor	7.67	>30
I12(34)	Farmer	Primary School	Farmer	Entrepreneur (L)	EMBA	8.67	>400

I13(41)	Farmer	Primary School	Farmer	Independent Investor	EMBA	6.67	>100
I14(45)	Factory Team Leader	Middle School	Farmer	Entrepreneur (L)	Bachelor	8	>600
I15(44)	Factory Worker	High School	Farmer	Entrepreneur (L)	College	7	>200
I16(33)	Entrepreneur (L)	Primary School	Farmer	Entrepreneur (L)	EMBA	8.7	>200
I17(31)	Entrepreneur (M)	High School	Farmer	Entrepreneur (M)	EMBA	7.3	>100

LCC

I18(27)	Entrepreneur (S)*	Primary School	Farmer	Hotel Manager	College	6.3	>15
I19(33)	Farmer	Middle School	Farmer	High-level Executive	College	6.3	>10
I20(40)	Farmer	Without Education	Farmer	Entrepreneur (S)	High School	5.3	>5
I21(25)	Factory Worker	Middle School	Farmer	Entrepreneur (S)	College	6	>5
I22(33)	Farmer	Without Education	Farmer	Entrepreneur (S)	Middle School	3.67	>5
I23(40)	Farmer	Without Education	Farmer	High-level Executive	Bachelor	6.67	>2
I24(31)	Farmer	Without Education	Farmer	Entrepreneur (S)	Middle School	3.67	>2
I25(34)	Entrepreneur (S)	Without Education	Farmer	Entrepreneur (S)	High School	5.33	>10
I26(39)	Farmer	Without Education	Farmer	Entrepreneur (L)	Middle School	4.67	>40
I27(44)	Farmer	Without Education	Farmer	Entrepreneur (M)	Bachelor	6.67	>20
I28(35)	Entrepreneur (S)	Without Education	Farmer	Entrepreneur (S)	College	6.67	>20
I29(38)	Worker	Without Education	Farmer	Entrepreneur (S)	College	5.67	>20