

DIGITAL MOBILITY AND CULTURAL CONSUMPTION

Online Reception of Contemporary British
Television Dramas in China

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Digital Mobility and Cultural Consumption
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Television Dramas in China

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**To my Mom and Dad,
For their unconditional love and support.**

献给我的母亲和父亲，
感谢他们一直以来的爱和支持。

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the popularity and audience engagement of British TV dramas in China, as this represents a massive and continuous trend among Chinese audiences online since 2010. Based on multi-modal methods combining digital ethnographic methods, interviews and a case study, this thesis has examined the consumption of British TV dramas in its situated social-political context that is largely overlooked in the study of transnational TV dramas in China. The theoretical framework draws on cosmopolitan, Bourdieu's concepts of capital and taste, and Cultivation theory. It studies the consumption of foreign AV content in a digital setting in the current media-restrained Chinese society.

The implications of this study are fourfold: First, taste hierarchy as a means of social distinction is observed in the consumption of British TV dramas in China, as watching British TV dramas is perceived as a reputational badge of sophistication, taste and high-end. Second, findings show an association between digital/virtual mobility, social distinction and transnational TV drama consumption in China, as increasing media policies and censorship has determined how foreign content is consumed. Third, the consumption of British TV dramas shows the desire of the Chinese audience to keep a connection with the world culture in a gradually restricted media environment. Fourth, British TV dramas satisfy audiences' growing need for cultural materials to identify with their micro-political struggles of everyday life. In particular, the queer readings of British TV dramas in China have promoted LGBTQ culture in China to a certain extent. The findings in this thesis indicate its significant value for the Chinese LGBTQ community.

Abstract (In Danish)

Denne afhandling har undersøgt modtagelsen af britiske tv-dramaer i Kina ved at kortlægge disse mediers popularitet og seernes interaktion, som siden 2010 har været en vigtig trend blandt det kinesiske publikum. I en kombination af metoder fra digital etnografi, seerinterviews og casestudies er forbruget af britiske dramaserier undersøgt med afsæt i den relevante socialpolitiske kontekst – en ofte overset vinkel i studiet af transnationale tv-seriers modtagelse i Kina. Undersøgelsen bygger teoretisk på Bourdieus begreber om kapital og smag, på kosmopolitisme, samt teori om Brug og Tilfredsstillelse, den kortlægger hermed det digitale forbrug af udenlandsk AV-indhold i det nuværende, begrænsede medielandskab i Kina.

Fire vigtige pointer kan fremhæves fra dette studie. Forbrug af britiske dramaserier i en kinesisk kontekst forstås som en social markør, der signalerer god smag og eksklusivitet, og det bruges til at statuere social differentiering i et “smagshierarki”. Desuden indikerer dette studie at der kan findes en forbindelse mellem social differentiering, forbrug af transnationale dramaserier, og digital mobilitet, idet Kinas restriktive mediepolitik og mediecensur er afgørende for både hvordan udenlandsk tv kan tilgås, og hvem der faktisk formår at gøre det. Dertil kommer at den store interesse for britiske dramaserier afspejler kinesiske seeres ønske om netop at bevare en forbindelse til andre kulture trods det snævre og restriktive, nationale mediebillende. Endelig vises det hvordan britiske tv-serier kan tilfredsstille et kinesisk publikums voksende behov for kulturelt indhold, der adresserer de mikropolitiske kampe, som de selv oplever i hverdagen. Det er især den queer-teoretiske tolkning af britiske dramaserier som i nogen grad har promoveret LGBTQ-kulturer i Kina, og det fremgår af denne undersøgelse at disse netop har haft stor værdi for kinesiske LGBTQ miljøer.

Introduction

While American and Korean television dramas have attracted larger audiences in China over the past decades than any other foreign dramas, British television dramas not only seem to be making inroads but are enjoying a surging popularity in spite of the fact that they were virtually unknown until 2010. Like foreign political programmes broadcast on Chinese television, foreign television dramas have generally endured strict censorship laws that act as a means of maintaining social control (Keane, 2002). Consequently, while some foreign dramas have reached wider Chinese audiences, others such as the American-made *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019) and *The Good Wife* (2009-2016) have been banned from China altogether.

Against the stream of developments, it is striking that British television dramas, such as *Sherlock* (2010-2017) and *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015), are increasingly reaching more and more Chinese audiences. Commentators on global television have observed a massive demand for British television dramas in China (EnfoDesk, 2013; NetEase, 2013) noting that Chinese audiences with a relatively high socio-economic status are increasingly exhibiting a particular passion for them, 97% of whom at least possess a university degree (EnfoDesk, 2013; NetEase, 2013). Most importantly, British television dramas are reaching significantly larger audiences online and in doing so, are attracting increasing attention on various social media platforms. A closer engagement with some of the online platforms that stream British television dramas reveals that wide-ranging and impassioned discussions about British TV and British popular culture are taking place daily at an unprecedented rate.

Despite strict censorship, supervision and tight regulation, British television dramas appear to have emerged from the latest developments on the Chinese television market over the last few years in a much stronger position than before. This strong position, as reflected in the surging

popularity of British television dramas, has, in turn, benefitted significantly from the advancement of Internet technology. Since 2012, several major video websites, including Sohu.com, Youku.com, Tudou.com and Tencent, have launched streaming television channels dedicated to broadcasting British television dramas (NetEase, 2013). As the popularity of British dramas continues to soar, associated fan groups are becoming increasingly active on various social media platforms. Popular social media sites such as “*Yingguo Yingju Dianying*”¹ (Britain British television dramas and films) have attracted more than 3.84 millions followers (by 2023). An illustrative example of how popular British television dramas are in Mainland China was demonstrated during a state visit by the then UK Prime Minister David Cameron in 2013. Cameron’s Sina Weibo account was filled with thousands of requests to speed up the release of the new series of *Sherlock*, which led him to comment on this in one of his interviews during the visit (BBC, 2014; Youku, 2013a). Daily Mail also implies the production team of *Sherlock* has prepared special message exclusively for the Chinese market, with an article titled with “The *Sherlock* clue only the Chinese can crack: Christmas special gives secret message to 98 million fans of 'Curly Fu' in China” (Joseph & Cockroft, 2015).

Three key points are worth noting here. First, commentators have noted that wide-ranging and impassioned discussions about the viewed British television dramas in particular and British popular culture in general are taking place on the aforementioned social media platforms at an unprecedented rate (EnfoDesk, 2013). In particular, the LGBTQ² themes in British TV dramas seem to have been given extra attention by Chinese audiences, so much so that British TV drama and Britain have been given new names by young Chinese - *rotten*³ *drama* and *rotten*

¹ *Yingguo Yingju Dianying*” <http://www.weibo.com/uktvb>

² LGBTQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning.

³ “Rotten” is a mocking term that refers to being “gay” in Chinese popular culture. See further discussion in Chapter 4.

country (Han, 2014). As such, there is a recognition that British television dramas and the discussions they trigger have the potential to shape the social and cultural reality of Chinese viewers. This is reminiscent of some historical studies on television viewing patterns in Asia more generally, which found that audiences tend to be influenced by Western television in several ways (Hagiwara et al., 1999; Willnat et al., 2002). For example, high school students in the Philippines who often watched American television programmes were reported to have become less sympathetic to traditional values such as salvation, forgiveness and wisdom (Tan et al., 1985). In Korea, females who watched more American television were reported to have become more “liberal” in contrast to males who showed more protective attitudes towards Korean culture (Kang & Morgan, 1986), while women in China who often did the same were found to be more likely to support individualistic values (Chaffee, 1992 cf. Barker 1997, p.132).

Second, some television industry sources in Mainland China claim that the overwhelming majority of Chinese audiences viewing British television dramas online are from a background that enjoys a relatively high socio-economic status (EnfoDesk, 2013). Given that the number of Chinese viewers with a high social economic status has grown massively over the last decade and given their crucial role in shaping society as a whole, does this imply that the exponential growth in the popularity of British television dramas is primarily explained by the tastes and preferences of the well-to-do Chinese viewers?

Third, the distribution of British TV dramas in China has been deeply regulated by media policies and censorship. This means that the ability to access *banned* information fundamentally distinguishes who has access to more foreign information and how it is consumed and appropriated. Does this mean that media regulations and digital mobility, which is the ability to access digital space beyond geographical restrictions, determine the audience

for British TV drama and its reception in China (see digital mobility in Chapter 2)? More research is needed to study the association between digital mobility and transnational TV reception more effectively.

Existing literature and industry observers (Mao, 2019; Zhu, 2014; Zhang, 2017; Zhao, 2016) have attempted to explain the surging popularity of British television dramas in Mainland China as follows. Taking *Downton Abbey* and *Sherlock* as examples, observers have claimed that the high production value of stories portraying romantic relations and family struggles with a historic background and the oscillation between modern and ancient times with intense fast-paced storylines are the main reasons the dramas are very popular with growing Chinese audiences. While this might be the case, and might perhaps even be true for other foreign television dramas as well, these claims need to be further investigated in the context of the social-political background of Chinese society. Although some scholars have argued that British television programmes in general are known for a combination of the British heritage brand encompassing a sense of “proper and upper-class culture” and the “mod” which is more hip and current (Selznick, 2008) – both of which are seen to embody “quality” (Chapman, 2014), more focused research needs to be undertaken to investigate this phenomenon effectively.

Although research on British television dramas in China exists, it has tended to focus mainly on the history of importing British TV dramas and on analysing a few popular examples (Mao, 2019; Zhu, 2014; Zhang, 2017; Zhao, 2016), and much of this research now seems dated, especially in the context of restricted media policies and censorship. A comprehensive academic study exploring the reasons behind the surging popularity of British television dramas or investigating the audience engagement in Mainland China is largely missing.

Moreover, at a time in Mainland China when the Internet has become the main viewing platform for foreign television programmes more generally, and foreign television dramas in particular, it is instructive and timely to conduct a comprehensive study on how media policies and censorship shape the reception of transnational TV dramas. In doing so, this research seeks to contribute to an understanding of a trend that will inform scholarship on television studies more generally and popular culture in the social-political Chinese society in particular.

Based on a previous study on the online reception of British television dramas in China (Xu, 2018), this thesis will examine the reception of British television dramas in China starting from 2010 to 2019, when the surging popularity appears to have begun. As such, drawing on existing literature on transnational television dramas and audience studies and using combined qualitative methods for data collection, this research seeks to explore two main research questions, supported by three sub-questions:

1. What are the reasons behind the popularity of British television dramas among Chinese audiences?
2. How do Chinese audiences engage with the significance of British TV dramas?
 - 3) In which way is British TV drama seen as symbolic capital for social distinction and upward mobility?
 - 4) As most of the viewing happens online – particularly on pirated channels – how do people reflect on their transgressive behaviour in relation to existing media policy?
 - 5) Do the engagements with British TV dramas carry potential civic values?

Here I provide a summary of what each chapter contains in this thesis:

Chapter 1 provides a brief introduction to the landscape of the television market and societal transition in China from 1978 to date. In particular, it provides a research context for subsequent studies in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 by analysing several examples of media policies and

regulations for social media and foreign AV products in China. It helps to better understand participants' reception of British TV dramas in the social environment in which they are situated.

Chapter 2 introduces the literature review and theoretical framework of this thesis. It draws on previous studies on the reception of transnational TV dramas, queer readings, taste hierarchy, cosmopolitanism, digital mobility and cultural consumption for their close association with the research questions. In particular, it looks at the audience reception of foreign TV dramas in China, especially Western ones, for its close cultural proximity to British TV dramas. The theoretical framework builds a model based on Bourdieu's cultural capital and distinction, cosmopolitanism theory, and cultivation study. This model helps to better understand the research data collected and how such data should be negotiated within the digital context in Chinese society.

Chapter 3 introduces the research methodologies conducted in this thesis: combined qualitative methods, including a case study, digital ethnographic methods and interviews. It also captures the problems I encountered with participant recruitment and how they affected my research journey.

Chapter 4 introduces the online phenomenon of British TV dramas in China. It provides a brief summary of four popular British TV dramas including crime drama *Sherlock* (2010-2017), heritage drama *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015), and modern dramas *Fleabag* (2016-2019) and *Skins* (2007-2013). The selection of these TV dramas was made from the extensive interview data I gathered from participants. It is also important to point out that all the dramas chosen were accessible in Mainland China through both legal and pirated channels. Part of the data

used in this chapter was presented in a previous study (Xu, 2018). The chapter subsequently offers a more in-depth analysis of the queer reading phenomenon of British TV dramas, providing context to better understand the engagement with British content that is analysed in Chapters 5 and 6.

Chapter 5 presents the findings from the interview data that address research question one (RQ1). It analyses the transnational appeal of British TV dramas based on participants' interviews, focusing on the following themes: textual appreciation, queer readings of British TV dramas, and aspirational meaning-making.

Chapter 6 further investigates how Chinese participants engage with British TV dramas to negotiate their own social, cultural and emotional reality. How do the culture, values, and norms of British TV dramas translate into everyday life for Chinese audiences? Do their transgressive actions provide soil for the cultivation of civic values? Therefore, Chapter 6 answers research question two (RQ2) and its three sub-questions from the following perspectives: cultural consumption as cosmopolitan mobility, television taste as means of social distinction and transgressive media consumption as a form of resistance towards media policy.

Chapter 7 is the discussion chapter. This chapter discusses the study's findings in a reflexive manner, elaborating on the implications and contributions of this study to the field. It also acknowledges the limitations of the research and provides recommendations for future studies.

The goal of this research is to examine and understand the reasons behind the surging popularity of British TV dramas in Chinese society and their audience engagement. It argues

that British TV dramas enable Chinese audiences to challenge traditional values and articulate resistance and oppositional cultural identities. Finally, I hope this thesis can contribute to the further development and refinement of emerging cultural phenomena that are taking place primarily online, especially in a time where much of our interaction is increasingly happening in digital spaces.

This dissertation is part of a 4+4 PhD programme at Aarhus University. I completed a Master's thesis during the first two years of my programme, which served as the basis for the further development of this dissertation. Some empirical data I collected then provides important empirical ground for this dissertation and is used partially in Chapters 1 and 4.

Chapter 1: China's media landscape

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the landscape of Chinese society and the media industry since the *Reform and Opening-up* policy was introduced in 1978. It aims to demonstrate the complexity of the cultural, social, and political environment in which foreign TV dramas thrive. In particular, it provides a factual basis for a subsequent understanding of the development and interpretation of British TV drama in China. This chapter, therefore, examines the social context of the development of British TV drama in China from two perspectives: first, the transition of Chinese society and the media landscape after 1978; second, a comprehensive analysis of the media regulations, policies and censorship in China that have been crucial to shaping the distribution and reception of British TV dramas. This chapter paves the way for Chapters 4, 5, and 6, where further examinations are conducted on the reception and audience engagement of British TV dramas in the social-political context of Chinese society.

1.1 China's Social Transition and TV Landscape: A Brief History

Chinese society has undergone some major changes in the past century that caused damage to China's economy and society: the 14-year-long Sino-Japanese War (1931-1945); the Chinese Civil War (1946-1949); the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) which led to economic recession; and the ten-year Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) that resulted in damage in cultural heritage, loss of social elites, and slowing down of economic growth (Feng, 2012). To bring the country back to order and improve the economy, the paramount leader Deng Xiaoping decided to lead a series of social-economic reforms aimed at building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics (*Zhongguo Tese Shehui Zhuyi*, 中国特色社会主义). In 1978, he announced the Reform and Opening-up policy (*Gaige Kaifang*, 改革开放), and the country officially opened the door to

allow foreign investors and companies to trade and invest in China. Reform and Opening-up has gradually transformed China from a country culturally dominated by Confucianism⁴ to a more globalized society whose focus on development has shifted to building a more modernized and open socialist country (Feng, 2012). Economically, the rapid changes have improved the material life of Chinese people. Culturally, the influx of foreign music, films, TV, and literature has widely penetrated people's lives and brought changes to people's values, worldviews, and lifestyles (Mühlhahn, 2019). The urban young generation born after the one-child policy (1978) has been caught up in tremendous changes between the old and new. They are facing traditional values and high expectations from family and a rapidly-developing Chinese society; on the other hand, they are the primary consumers of foreign products and popular culture that are constantly challenging their values and lifestyles (Bell, 2008; Feng, 2012; Gao, 2016).

The reform of society resulted in the rapid development of the media industry in China. China's television industry has replaced newspapers to become the leading medium for advertising, which accelerated the rapid development of market commercialization and played a significant role in shaping social norms and values (Bai, 2014; Feng, 2012; Zhu, 2012, 2013). The commercialization of Chinese television started when advertising was introduced in the late 1970s and became a legitimate source of revenue for television stations (Bai, 2014). The television market started booming, with the number of television sets increasing rapidly from 5 million to 160 million from 1980 to 1990 (Hazerlbarth, 1997; Wang & Singhal, 1992). In 1991, over 600 million (52% of the total population) people regularly watched television in China (Wang & Singhal, 1992). Television has become a common household appliance in Chinese families.

⁴ Traditional Chinese culture and core values were derived from Confucianism, which is built on love for peace and humanity, devotion to family, harmony and respect for seniors.

Beijing Television Station was China's first TV station, launched in 1958, and its broadcasting and development were disrupted by the Cultural Revolution's political movements (Huang, 1994; Feng, 2012). In 1978, Beijing Television Station was renamed China Central Television (CCTV). It works both as a political propaganda instrument and to generate revenue from the market. After establishing the market economy in 1992, the television industry expanded rapidly and became a crucial player in the marketization of the Chinese economy and the formation of a consumer society. Since then, the Chinese government began to gradually lower funding for television stations, and Chinese media organizations started transforming from complete propaganda tools to business enterprises (Sun, 2007). Media organizations were competing with new innovative, entertaining content (Bai & Song, 2014). Variety shows, travel programmes and dating shows started to gain popularity, with CCTV and Hunan TV taking the lead in broadcasting popular entertainment programmes such as *Zhengda Zongyi* (Zhengda Variety) and *Kuailedabenying* (Happy Camp) (Bai & Song, 2014). Chinese television producers began to think in terms of market expectations instead of political benchmarks (Zhu et al., 2008). Television is no longer simply a political machine, it now also plays a crucial role in shaping dominant social norms, cultivating consumerism and individualism (Bai, 2014).

With the gradual opening of the Chinese market, more foreign TV programmes have flooded into China and brought new ideas and worldviews to Chinese audiences. During the 1980s, the dominant Chinese television drama narratives mainly involved social changes in Chinese society. These television dramas worked as a cultural platform for Chinese viewers to debate the rapidly evolving cultural changes and the most prevalent concerns and deepest dilemmas in society (Zhu et al., 2008; Zhu, 2013). At the same time, imported foreign TV series such as *A Doubtful Blood Type* (Xueyi, Japan, 1980), *Isaura the Slave* (Nünu, Brazil, 1984), *Slander* (Feibang, Mexico, 1985) and *Frustration* (Kanke, Mexico, 1986) gained major attention in the

Chinese market. The success of foreign TV dramas inspired China to start experimenting with producing localized soap operas in the 1990s. For instance, the 50-episode soap opera *Ke Wang* (Yearnings) was broadcast in 1990, featuring ordinary Chinese people's lives from the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to the reform period in the early 1980s and family relations. *Ke Wang* gained unprecedented popularity, with an estimated 550 million viewers – over 100 television stations in China broadcast it within the first year (Wang & Singhal, 1992).

The transition of China's media landscape from the late 1970s onward has been remarkable. Chinese television has reflected the country's shifting socio-cultural dynamics, from embracing international TV programmes to creating successful local productions. This thriving media environment, which is enhanced by both domestic and foreign content, has entertained and influenced large groups of audiences in China. However, as media plays an increasingly powerful role in shaping public opinion and values, concerns about its control and limits surfaced. The next section will cover the crucial subject of how China manages the fine line between enabling diverse content and ensuring it aligns with broader societal and national interests.

1.2 Media Regulation and Censorship

Mass media in China plays an important role in propaganda. Media content that generates public debate, stimulates critical thinking, or questions authority is strictly regulated by the Party-state (Gao, 2016). The Chinese government has implemented stricter regulations to limit the influence of audio-visual (AV) content. The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT)⁵ acts like the policymaking body and supervisory organization. Its responsibilities include and are not limited to: drawing up guidelines and policies for the

⁵ SARFT was renamed as National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) in 2018.

publicity of radio, film, and television; guiding the direction of public opinions and creation; drafting laws and regulations on the administration of publication, television, film, and copyright management; and formulating policies and supervising the content of press, publishing, broadcasting, film, and television (SARFT, 2013).

The regulation of media content reflects the complexities of China's political and cultural environment. This context is indispensable to comprehend the popularity of British TV dramas in China. As such, this section aims to highlight aspects of media regulation and censorship in China, with a specific focus on setting the societal backdrop where cultural phenomena related to the growing popularity of British TV dramas are unfolding. Specifically, this section introduces the establishment of the "Great Firewall of China", mechanisms for ideological control such as those related to LGBTQ themes, and regulations concerning foreign TV content. These elements enhance our understanding of the online interpretative trends associated with British TV dramas, including the development of a queer reading subculture, and the conversation around socially complex issues often deemed controversial within China's socio-political context (more discussions in Chapter 4).

Internet

According to the statistics from the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC, 2014; 2018; 2023), the number of internet users in China has seen a remarkable increase over the years⁶. In June 2014, the country had 632 million internet users. By December 2018, this figure had grown to 829 million, and it further surged to 1067 million by December 2022. This

⁶ However, China's Internet penetration rate falls significantly behind neighbouring countries such as Japan (93.3%) and South Korea (97%) (InternetworldStats.com, 2022).

dramatic increase of over 400 million users in a span of approximately eight years, along with a 30% increase in Internet penetration, underscores the rapid pace of digitalization and the widespread adoption of the internet in China.

The rapid development of the Internet and the reduction in the price of computers in the early 2000s led to more people owning computers and gaining greater access to cultural products. Downloading foreign films and TV dramas has become more accessible from P2P websites such as eMules.com. Meanwhile, the censorship system “the Great Firewall of China” has been established to block access to foreign websites, Internet tools, and apps to limit Western influence and maintain social control. Popular social media, search engines, and video-on-demand (VoD) services such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Google, Wikipedia, Netflix, and HBO are among the blocked websites and apps in Mainland China. The restrictions on access to foreign media and international competitors entering the Chinese market have benefitted the development of domestic Internet enterprises (Yang, 2009). Chinese search engine Baidu, microblogging website Sina Weibo (referred to as Weibo from this point), instant messenger app WeChat, VoD platforms Youku, TenCent, SOHU, IQIYI, and others serving the same purpose have emerged.

However, the ever-increasing information policy and growing demand for knowledge and foreign culture among the awakened generation of young people have created a considerable gap between Chinese youth and the world. Those with better language and technological capacities could use a VPN to “get across the wall” (翻墙) to stay in touch with global connections and enjoy the free flow of information (Hsiao, 2014a, 2014b; Wang & Zhang, 2017). At the same time, those who experience a language barrier and lack technological skills usually struggle to maintain connections with the outside world. Using VPN to access

information from banned websites and stay in contact with the outside world is not a privilege afforded to everyone.

Ideology

The censorship of TV programming essentially aims to control public access to information that could encourage challenges to the Party authority (Shirk, 2011). This has posed a considerable effect on cultural productions, often steering them away from addressing social concerns or providing any socio-political critique. Instead, cultural products tend to be bland and non-controversial (Miao, 2011), reflecting the broader goal of preserving political stability through the careful management of information. Chinese production companies usually impose stricter self-censorship based on their “TV instinct” to avoid censorship problems. Avoidance is the typical strategy for negotiation to reduce the risk of state intervention. “Changing sensitive concepts, playing word games, changing the business model and changing the title” are commonly used tactics to avoid conflicts (Zeng & Sparks, 2019, p.61).

The government has implemented a series of policies to exercise ideological control over cultural works. From 2003 to 2013, SARFT carried out a series of regulations to “Clean up the Screen” (*Jing Hua Ying Ping*). This series of actions were taken to rectify the TV programmes that overly pursued commercialization but failed to convey a healthy moral message to Chinese society. Several categories of TV shows were affected by the operation: gameshows, talent shows, and make-over shows were censored; police television dramas were suspended for portraying the dark side of Chinese society; TV producers were required to treat history and traditions with a “serious” attitude (Bai, 2014). However, there are no clear definitions regarding the terms of censorship. In practice, there is room for negotiation in the actual

importation and production processes as long as they are within the frameworks set out above (Zeng & Sparks, 2019).

The “Online Audio-visual Program Content Review Rules” (网络视听节目内容审核通则) released in 2017 bans online AV content that features “abnormal sexual relationships and behaviours, including incest, same-sex relationships, sexual perversion, sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual violence, etc.” (CNSA, 2017). The regulation states that this addressed content needs to be censored and deleted before broadcast. Although homosexuality was decriminalised in 1997 and removed from being classed as a mental disorder in 2001 (Chiu, 2018), the taboo and stigma of it remain a problem within Chinese society. The immediate effect has been seen in the award-winning film *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), released in China’s cinemas in 2019. The film was heavily censored prior to release. According to CNN (Baptista, 2019), there were six scenes with gay themes that were deleted from the film, including: a kissing scene between two male characters, a scene where the singer was confronted about his sexuality, and a scene that simply included the word “gay”. To fully understand the film with all its original scenes attached, one needs to look for alternative methods, such as pirate content provided by fan subtitle groups.

Following this regulation, in 2018, The microblogging platform Weibo announced a three-month “detoxification” plan that aimed to remove any anime, game and short video content that included pornography, violence, or LGBTQ themes to create a “clean and harmonious environment”. However, the microblogging platform Weibo has become the battleground for resisting and negotiating media control in China. The detoxification plan has caused anger among Weibo users. An online protest began with people using the hashtag #我是同性恋 and #IAmGay in support of the LGBTQ community (Hernández & Mou, 2018). The protest has

gathered more than half a million posts featuring people's personal stories and voices against Weibo's discrimination of sexual freedom. After receiving overwhelming backlash online, Weibo reversed its ban on LGBTQ content, stating the "cleaning plan" would only focus on removing pornography and violent content, not LGBTQ content (Chiu, 2018).

Such large-scale online protest against media regulation shows that Weibo has become a crucial platform for forming and controlling public opinion, which is under the control of strict censorship aiming to suppress rumours and sensitive content. Weibo as a double-edged sword: on one side, it could empower citizens and encourage freedom of speech; on another side, the Chinese authorities might use it to strengthen further control (Jiang & Xu, 2009; Noesselt, 2014; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011; Yang, 2009). It is clear to see that civic values have been brewing among more young generations of Chinese, who desire a more liberated and liberating societal environment.

Foreign Audio-Visual Products

China's entry to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 marked a significant milestone in its opening-up journey. It resulted in the market developing more radically than ever before (Feng, 2012). More diverse foreign AV programmes have been imported, particularly films and television programmes from Western countries (Keane, 2002; Guo, 2004). By 2005, VoD websites emerged, offering additional channels for Chinese audiences to access foreign cultural products (Y.Q.Li, 2020). With the traditional television viewership on the decline, these VoD platforms have become a crucial way of consuming television programmes in China (Zhang, 2019).

However, alongside the increase in imported foreign media content, there has been a corresponding strengthening in content regulation. In 2004, SARFT (2004) stated that no foreign programmes that offend Chinese sensibilities, hurt China's reputation, disrupt social stability, or damage the honour and interests of the State shall be broadcast. The regulation has further tightened in 2012 when the "circular of the SARFT on Further Strengthening and Improving the Management of the Introduction and Broadcasting of Overseas Film and Television Dramas" was released (The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2012). According to this circular, foreign television dramas are restricted to non-prime time slots (outside of 19:00-22:00) and must not exceed 25% of the total daily broadcast time. Moreover, before content can be submitted to SARFT for approval, it must first undergo an initial review by provincial departments to ensure "the direction and tone" align with regulatory expectations. This means foreign TV dramas with themes involving sensitive societal issues or containing violent or vulgar content are discouraged from importation.

In September 2014, SARFT released a new regulation named "Further Implementation of Regulations Concerning the Management of Foreign Films and TV Dramas Online", aimed at strengthening control over foreign films and TV dramas on Chinese video platforms (China Film Administration, 2014). This regulation draws attention to a number of crucial ideas: online video platforms are encouraged to feature foreign films and TV dramas that have healthy content, demonstrate high production quality, and promote the themes of truth, goodness and beauty. Foreign films and TV dramas broadcast online must legally obtain "Film Public Screening License (电影片公映许可证)" or "TV Drama Distribution License (电视剧发行许可证)" issued by SARFT. Additionally, these broadcasts must also have the Internet broadcasting rights granted by the copyright owners. Foreign films and dramas that fail to obtain such licenses are strictly prohibited from being broadcast online. It is crucial for online

video websites to ensure the total volume of foreign films and TV dramas broadcast annually should not exceed 30% of the total volume of domestic content that the website purchased and broadcast in the previous year. Furthermore, platforms are expected to submit their annual plans to SARFT for preliminary review. These plans ought to include comprehensive information of the intended broadcasted foreign films and TV dramas, such as content summaries and a record of domestic content purchased in the preceding year. Finally, starting from 1st April 2015, foreign films and TV dramas that have not been registered are not allowed to be broadcast online.

The regulation reflects the state's determination to ensure that imported foreign films and TV dramas align with the society's core tones and values. In addition, the quota set for foreign content ensures that foreign content does not overshadow domestic content. These series of regulations have significantly changed the dynamic of Chinese VoD platforms. An interview with IQIYI's Deputy Chief Editor, Wang Zhao Nan, by The Beijing News (2014) revealed that platforms must provide SARFT with comprehensive details of an entire season of TV drama, including subtitles for all episodes, prior to broadcasting. This article named "Synchronized viewing of American and Korean dramas on the Internet is *out of the question*", suggests that due to these regulations, newly produced foreign TV dramas cannot be broadcast simultaneously with their global premieres. As a result, VoD websites no longer have the edge of offering timely, un-censored content, especially when compared to pirate channels such as fansubbing websites.

Digital Era and Grassroots Communities

With the various restrictions on foreign AV content imposed on television channels, the Internet has become a crucial way to meet Chinese audiences' growing demands of wanting to

enjoy more and better overseas cultural products. With China's entry into WTO, the influx of foreign cultural products has awakened the young generation's desire for more diverse foreign cultural products. With information primarily shared on the Internet, the piracy of copyright-protected digital goods has become a growing problem in China's film and television industries. New methods of file transfer and new pirate websites are emerging rapidly, and grassroots communities such as fan subtitle groups are growing (Hsiao, 2014a; 2014b). As such, the fansubbing phenomenon emerged in China in around 2001 through fans of Japanese anime and computer games. Fansubbing is the process of fans translating and subtitling different kinds of audio-visual material into a language other than the original (Zhang, 2013). Fan communities have played a leading role in the distribution and promotion of foreign AV content that is restricted in China. In the spirit of volunteerism and for-fans-by-fans, the Chinese fan subtitle groups have worked hard as a force to consistently transfer and translate more diverse foreign audio-visual content and genres into Chinese (Diaz-Cintas & Sanchez, 2006, Hsiao, 2014a, 2014b). The range of the programmes covers TV series, entertainment shows, films, documentaries, educational courses, and more. They utilise their language skills and technical capacities to enhance the accessibility of foreign audio-visual content in the Chinese market (Hsiao, 2014a; O'Hagan, 2012). Jenkins' sees fans as textual poachers who "transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture" (Jenkins 1992 p23). They are both consumers and producers of the media text, who engage in recreation, textual productivity and circulate among them. Chinese fans are often invited to be engaging in the production of the subtitling practices. For instance, fan subtitle group ICE's⁷ often recruit ideas from their weibo followers for "non-mainstream" British content to be translated by their subtitle group. Similar practices can often be seen in other major subtitle groups.

⁷ 冰冰字幕组(ICE) dedicates to translating British TV dramas. It has 790,000 followers on Weibo by 2023.

Like most fan groups from the rest of the world, fan groups in China provide their work primarily free of charge, as their work is based on their interests and the spirit of sharing for the public good. Many subtitle groups provide parallel bilingual subtitles that are usually present at the bottom of the videos. Some also provide notes that explain idioms and references regarding cultural and historical practices to fulfill the needs of the Chinese audience to have a more authentic viewing experience (Hsiao, 2014a). Major subtitle groups such as YYeTs run their own website, video streaming mobile app, and e-dictionary. Memberships are free of charge and can be gained through the “gamification method”, such as signing in daily online to gain “points” that could later be exchanged for membership (Wang & Zhang, 2017). Programmes without subtitles (referred to as “raw meat” in Chinese) are usually released prior to the translated ones (referred to as “cooked meat”) for people who want to watch first-hand content. The competition for time efficiency is crucial for many people as foreign programmes are not allowed to be broadcast or released online without having their whole series censored by Chinese authorities. This time gap leaves room for people to watch unauthorised editions and participate in discussions online.

However, although Chinese fan subtitle groups have received massive support from Chinese audiences, they exist in a grey zone due to the pirated nature of the content they work on and distribute that is not accessible otherwise on legitimate channels (Hsiao, 2014a, 2014b). Fan subtitle groups in China have evolved from cultural practice to resistance, as “the spread of fansubbing reveals the paradox of the state’s continuous enforcement of censorship” (Wang & Zhang, 2017, p.302). Previous studies show that the Chinese government does not implement strong actions toward fan activities “as long as everything is kept at the material consumption level and within the party line” (Zhang & Mao, 2013, p.50). However, on World Intellectual

Property Day in 2013, the authorities shut down several subtitle groups' websites, which caused angers online. To protest this government campaign, the metaphor "pirates are fire-bringers (盜版者就是盜火者)" circulated widely on Weibo, comparing the Chinese subtitle groups to Prometheus (Hsiao, 2014a, 2014b). Matters escalated on 3 February 2021, news emerged that brought a shockwave on Weibo: 14 subtitlers from YYeTs were jailed for distributing unlicensed content for users to stream and download (Yunyouji, 2021). Furthermore, the content on YYeTs had been disabled and erased. Weibo was filled with anger about the decision made by the authorities. This collective action illustrated the views of many audiences in China, who see fan subtitle groups as heroes and cultural preachers in Chinese society. Subtitle groups are no longer just grassroots organisations for audio-visual products; they are also playing a role in bridging cross-cultural communication.

Throughout this discussion, a recurring theme has emerged: the tension between state regulation and censorship, and the grassroots efforts to resist and get past state controls for more diverse cultural products. The Chinese government keeps a close watch on domestic and foreign content to ensure they align with the core political values. With the rapidly developing internet technology, more and more people have started to challenge this authority, in the form of using VPN or becoming part of fan subtitle groups to help distribute more uncensored AV content to China. Overall, the complexity of media regulation and grassroots resistance could continue to last in the foreseeing future.

1.3 Conclusion

The brief introduction to the media landscape and transformation of Chinese society in the past 40 years provides a cultural and historical background for understanding British TV dramas' reception and audience engagement in China. Internet development provides people with a

platform to pursue freedom and functions as a tool for maintaining social and ideological control in China (Tsui, 2003). It has facilitated the distribution and circulation of foreign audio-visual and cultural products that have awakened the Chinese younger generation's passion for an authentic taste in foreign popular cultures (Hsiao, 2014a). The regulations and related events discussed above provide background knowledge to understand the distribution and reception of British TV dramas in China. It has become clear that fans' transgressive practices are shaping the way young Chinese watch television in China under the ever-rising media restrictions.

The copyright problem for foreign audio-visual products in China is rather a complex issue. To understand the high piracy rate in China, one should consider the aforementioned regulations, policies, and censorship of cultural products. For many Chinese audiences, the lack of legal channels to access foreign audio-visual products causes people to seek piracy through fan subtitle groups and piracy websites (Hsiao, 2014a, 2014b; Wang & Zhang, 2017). It is reasonable to assume that as long as government regulations on foreign cultural products are not relaxed, the piracy problem will continue. Thus, it is crucial to examine audience reception and choices of media consumption in the context of ongoing media regulations and censorship. This chapter leads to questions that deserve further investigation in the following chapters. Do censorship and media policies play a role in the reception of British TV dramas? As the viewing primarily happens online, how do people reflect on their transgressive consumption of British TV dramas in relation to existing media policy?

Chapter 2: Transnational Television Reception

Cultural studies provide important insights and knowledge to help us understand social transformations and cultural changes (McRobbie, 1992). They provide us with the tools necessary to comprehend how cultural practices are intertwined with broader power dynamics, thereby assisting us in interpreting and navigating the cultural dimensions of social issues. Studies within Cultural studies are particularly useful to examine media culture phenomena that occur in our everyday life. As Kellner (2011, p8) suggests, cultural studies show how media culture “provides the materials for constructing views of the world, behaviour, and even identities.....articulates the dominant values, political ideologies, and social developments and novelties of the era”. Therefore, cultural studies enable us to understand how media culture provides materials that shape our values, beliefs, the conception of class, race, sexuality, and view of the world (Kellner, 2011). They offer tools to comprehend, interpret and criticise the meanings and accepted norms we encounter in our everyday life. Thus, cultural studies contribute to our understanding of television and popular cultures, and how these cultural phenomena should be interpreted and criticised within the context of our everyday life.

The development of satellite, cable, and Internet technologies has enabled a greater flow of television across cultures and boundaries. Transnational television, which Chris Barker (1997, p.21) described as how “technology, ownership, program distribution and audiences operate across the boundaries of nation-states and language communities”, has now created a borderless world where the link between culture and territory becomes blurred (Feng, 2012). Transnational television serves as a platform where global, local and regional elements engage with one another. Its culture operates within “social relations of the nation-states, of national and global formations” (Mikos, 2019, p81). Numerous studies have been conducted around the globe examining the transnational flow of television shows such as *Dallas* (1978-1991), *Yo soy*

Betty, la fea (1999-2001), *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) trilogy and Danish TV dramas (Ang, 1982; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Mathijs, 2008; Mikos, et.al., 2008; Mikos & Perrotta 2012a, 2012b; Eicher, 2020; Esser, 2020; Jensen & McCutcheon, 2020). These studies shed light on how transnational television content can cross national borders and offer meaning to people with different social and cultural backgrounds.

While there is considerable research on the reception of foreign television dramas in China, few studies have taken the social-political context of Chinese society into consideration. Additionally, less research has focused on the reception of British TV dramas and addressing the queer reading of such dramas in China. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating the transnational appeals of British TV dramas in China and how Chinese audiences make sense of the significance of British content. This chapter is divided into two parts which include a literature review and a theoretical framework. The literature review examines existing research on the reception of transnational television dramas, taste hierarchy in television consumption, cosmopolitanism and cultural consumption, and digital mobility. The second part of this chapter provides a theoretical framework drawing on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, cosmopolitanism studies and cultivation theory. This framework serves as a model for analysing interview data to understand the reception of British TV dramas in China's social-political context.

2.1 Transnational Television Dramas Reception

Stuart Hall's (1980) influential "encoding/decoding" theory has been widely cited in early studies of television reception works. Hall's thesis challenges previous studies that consider audiences to be passive and creates a model suggesting audiences are active readers of media texts. He suggests audiences decode media messages differently depending on their socio-

economic background and personal experiences. Many studies have tested Hall's approach, including Morley's (1980) "*The Nationwide audience*", demonstrating that audiences interpreted, negotiated or resisted the preferred reading of a television programme based on their socio-economic position. John Fiske (1987) further strengthened the active audience paradigm and argued that texts are polysemic and can be understood to have numerous distinct meanings depending on one's social situation. Although the encoding/decoding model still has merits in current media studies, it also has shortcomings in presenting a linear communication model of encoder and decoder. Such a model loses value in studying transnational TV dramas today, when digital technology, interpersonal communication and social media contribute significantly to the distribution and reception process.

Proximity theories have been commonly drawn in understanding audiences' preferences and consumption patterns (Straubhaar, 1991; 2007). Cultural proximity encompasses shared linguistics, ethnicities, gestures, body language, definitions of humour, music traditions, shared values, and religions (Straubhaar & La Palestina, 2007). It is understood that audiences prefer media products that resonate with their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Examples of this include Mexican and Brazilian TV dramas and films, which are popular in Spanish and Portuguese-speaking worlds (Straubhaar & La Palestina, 2007; Sinclair, 2009). Apart from this, many other forces are also contributing factors that apply to cultural proximity. For instance, some genres feature archetypes that can reach beyond cultural differences to be accepted by audiences across borders, such as melodrama and telenovelas traveling well to many regions worldwide. Thematic proximity such as gender inequality and struggles in life, and value proximity such as shared religion and working ethics values in television dramas could also be appealing reasons for transnational television to succeed (Straubhaar, 2007; Straubhaar & La Palestina, 2007).

While proximity theories provide valuable frameworks for studying audience reception of transnational cultural products, increasing studies on transnational television dramas offer alternative viewpoints. Iwabuchi (2002) argues that cultural products sometimes show modernity aspiration that attracts audiences to an imagined desirable society. For instance, scholars find that audiences from Turkey and Australia find domestic dramas inferior to Danish TV dramas, largely due to the perceived progressive society in Denmark (Jensen & McCutcheon, 2020; Kaptan, 2020). In another approach, Eichner (2020) found that the audience's feelings of authenticity to Danish TV dramas are less to do with cultural proximity (Straubhaar & La Palestina, 2007). Instead, they find the address of media and politics, women's empowerment, and struggles within family and careers in Danish TV dramas relatable to their lifeworld (Rasmussen, 2014; Eichner, 2020). The notion of lifeworld refers to the perceived reality of the world, and the sense-making process is built on the everyday life experiences of the individuals (Rasmussen, 2014; Eichner, 2020). Esser (2020) adds to Eichner's arguments from a cognitive science approach and globalisation theory, suggesting that globalisation has contributed to place-specific languages, people, sounds and landscapes have added to Danish TV dramas' appeals to audiences outside of Denmark. Esser (2020) also drawn on Ien Ang's (1985) concept of "emotional realism", developed in her study on the transnational reception of *Dallas*. This term refers to the perceived connotative meaning of the narrative and text that resonates with individuals. It demonstrates how media content creates a sense of emotional closeness and authenticity among viewers regardless of cultural boundaries. Therefore, the proximity theories need to be considered according to different life contexts and social environments, especially when other factors such as life relevance, place-specific content, perceived modernity, and quality of the programmes can all be contributing factors to the popularity of transnational TV dramas around the world.

In a different approach, the “cultural discount” theory refers to cross-border television content that would lose value as local audiences have difficulties engaging with the norms and references in the media text (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988; Weissmann, 2012). However, increasing studies suggest that cultural differences can also become an attraction, especially when the programmes come from economically and culturally developed countries (O’Regan, 1992; Weissmann, 2012). For instance, Gans’ (1962) study on the popularity of American films among working-class adolescent British audiences shows that American films project “aspiration fantasies” that combine “social realism with personal goals” for a “middle-class lifestyle” for its young working-class audiences. Esser (2020) argues that the very Danish aesthetic, linguistic and landscape did not foster cultural discount amongst foreign audiences, instead, they added more appeal to the Danish TV dramas as more authentic and believable.

To accommodate global viewers, a considerable number of dramas are now made with international audiences in mind (Chalaby, 2010), minimising the cultural discount while decreasing particular national aspects or accentuating stereotypes (Blandford, 2005). Cultural discount is a major issue for production companies when trying to sell television programmes in the global market, especially when local markets cannot recoup the production costs of the TV programmes and more companies seek to rely on exports or co-financing to stay afloat (Bielby & Bielby, 2003, Bielby & Harrington, 2004). Although an increasing number of programmes cater to international audiences, audiences still experience cultural and social differences according to their national origin. Furthermore, doing so has resulted in fewer programmes that can be counted as US or UK productions due to the increasing number of co-productions in the TV industry. Producers adopt encoding tactics that are designed to appeal to a broader audience by generating various storylines; featuring a broader range of characters

with different ages, backgrounds and appearances; including a variety of attractions such as action scenes, landscapes, romances, etc. (Kuipers & De Kloet, 2009).

Many studies in transnational reception of cultural products suggest a connection with cosmopolitan audiences around the world facilitated by increasing global mobility and digital media (Gao 2016; Jiang & Leung, 2012; Straubhaar and La Palestina, 2007). Straubhaar and La Palestina (2007) argue that cultural capital plays a critical role in structuring individual's preferences and interests in consuming television programmes. Elites often have more personal global networks from family and schools, which leads them to acquire a more globalised personal identity, pursuing more global media choices. While people from lower-income working-class family who has less global connection prefer local programmes that are more culturally familiar (Straubhaar 2007, Straubhaar & La Palestina 2007). Cosmopolitan audiences could also facilitate the circulation of transnational cultural products locally and foster fan-led transnationalism (Hsiao,2014a). Hsiao (2014a) examined Chinese subtitlers-led transnationalism of US TV programmes in China as a result of media censorship and the limitation of imports of foreign cultural products. The Chinese subtitlers moralise their translation and circulation of unauthorised US TV programme content as producing something for the public benefit under the current censorship and social circumstances in China. Therefore, the above studies of transnational viewing practices can help to understand the phenomenon of British television in China, as the reasons for audiences' transnational viewing practices can be associated with various factors beyond culture and linguistic.

2.2 Studies of Foreign TV Dramas in China

Most of the studies on British TV in China are descriptive works providing information on translation works, online phenomena, production, distribution, reception, fandom and the literature presented in British TV dramas (Mao, 2019; Zhu, 2014; Zhang, 2017; Chi & Zhao, 2016; Zhao, 2016; Y.Q.Li, 2020; Zheng, 2023). The theoretical frameworks in several studies and unpublished master's degree theses have drawn on Stuart Hall's "encoding/decoding" approach (Hall, 1980; Jiang, 2015; Zhang, 2017), fandom and identity studies (Zhu, 2014; Zheng, 2023), as well as Uses and Gratifications study (Xu, 2018; Y.Q.Li, 2020). These studies generally highlight the transnational appeals of British TV dramas in China in their high-quality production, portrayal of characters, online distribution, innovative storytelling, addressing of heritage and literature, unique humour, and exoticism.

Many studies criticise the production quality of Chinese audio-visual products in comparison to British ones. Zhao (2016) argued that Chinese TV dramas often have superficial content, low production values, weak character development, and a lack of social responsibility when they address cultural and historical topics compared to British TV dramas. Zhao (2016) and Zhu (2014) have suggested that the global success of British TV dramas could shed light on the improvements in the production values and marketing of domestic dramas in China. Zhang (2017) added to this and suggested that enhancing cultural self-confidence, embracing Chinese culture, and reforming fiscal and taxation policies to advance the production of Chinese TV dramas could be the route for Chinese TV to enter the global market.

Several studies address Chinese audience engagement with Western TV dramas suggesting an association with goal-oriented purposes. Uses and Gratifications theory is a common approach that has been adopted which refers to the use of media text to fulfill audiences' needs (McQuail

et al., 1972; Katz et al., 1973; Rubin, 2009). For instance, Wang (2015) adopted a Uses and Gratifications approach to study Chinese audiences of *Prison Break* (2005-2009) and found that the primary uses of American TV dramas are entertainment, social interaction, and surveillance (information seeking). Amongst all three gratifications, entertainment is the most crucial result in this study. Unlike Wang's finding, Gao (2016) studied the popularity of American TV dramas among Chinese audiences and found that the perception of "authenticity" is the most mentioned as audiences use it for identification and self-reflection. Gao argued that the media engagement of American TV dramas was used far more than entertainment and escape. It was a symbolic tool for identity that triggered audiences' self-reflection in search of one's personhood. The contradictory findings reported by Wang and Gao could be related to the TV genres that each study was based on: Wang focused on *Prison Break*, and Gao used dramas covering several genres, such as teen drama *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012). Li (2020) has drawn on the Uses and Gratifications theory and conducted a snowballing survey through WeChat to study how Chinese university students choose British TV dramas and use them to fulfil their needs. Results show that Chinese university students use British TV for information (British culture), social interaction (sense of belonging), entertainment (relaxation) and education (English learning). Evidently, most of these previous studies have centred on young university students as active participants and failed to further investigate their understanding of the message and values embedded in media content on a deeper level. With their limited demographic samples focusing on university students, these studies have ignored several factors that could contribute to the different readings and media use on transnational TV dramas, such as class structures, audiences' social origins, and relevant media policy for foreign content in online spaces. In addition, these studies focus too much on the individual needs of media use and ignore the social context that audiences are situated in, which I argue is crucial for studying the reception of foreign cultural products in media-restricted Chinese society. Finally,

the Uses and Gratifications theory fails to capture the changes in values and attitudes over time in the process of exposure to foreign cultures and ideas, which is crucial in examining the audiences' interpretation and engagement of media text in British TV dramas.

2.3 Queer readings of television dramas

Studies on the aforementioned phenomenon of queer readings of transnational TV dramas in China (Chapter 1) are largely missing, particularly concerning British TV dramas in China. Therefore, I argue that British TV dramas facilitate a cosmopolitan imagination of globalisation, allowing audiences to challenge heterosexual dominance in global media and cultural flows. In addition, this thesis aims to fill the gaps in the queer interpretation of British TV dramas and shed light on what it means for LGBTQ audiences, especially in politically sensitive countries where LGBTQ and sexually freedom content is restricted and taboo.

Hampton's (2015) study compared the representations of *Sherlock's* Chinese female slash fans in British and US media. The word slash comes from the term "slash fiction", which is a sub-category of fan fiction that features homosexual relationships that were not specified in the original script (Allington, 2007). Hampton argued that Chinese slash fans and China has been personalised by British media as silly, shallow fangirl who is obsessed with Britain and British cultural goods, disavowing China's economic success. Elsewhere in the US media, Chinese fangirls were portrayed as "freedom fighters" who fight against oppression in a "homophobic and repressive society" (Hampton, 2015, p.237). Zheng (2023) found that the Chinese *Sherlock* fandom is predominantly female. The erotic fan production of *Sherlock* faces limitations due to censorship which leads to a dualistic fan culture that is actively producing content outside China and passive consumption within the country.

China's slash culture *Danmei* (耽美), a term derived from the Chinese language, refers to a genre of male-male romance stories that originated in Japan in the 1970s. This genre, which is aimed at and created by women and sexual minorities, was introduced to China in the 1990s through Japanese manga and anime. *Danmei* itself means "indulgence in beauty" in Chinese. It has since become a popular internet-based and fan-oriented cultural form in China. This term has involved from an underground fandom that produces slash fanfiction to male characters in manga to a broad genre of popular media content. However, *Danmei*'s depiction of homosexuality often puts it in conflict with the conservative sexual morals of the party-state, making its fans and practitioners vulnerable to prosecution (Chapter 1).

Zhang (2016) pointed out that slash fandom mobilises gender politics towards female empowerment in China, allowing fans to restructure the patriarchal system within fictional imagination. It provides escapism and offers an alternative solution in contrast to heterosexual romantic storytelling. Female fans are longing for representations of men that display hybrid identities, such as masculine/feminine, macho/sensitive. The preferences of these fans indicate a female-influenced shift in the conception of ideal masculinity or a manifestation of the crisis of masculinity in the West (Payne, 1995). Li (2009) claims that some Chinese female fans' interest in slash culture has no bearing on their everyday opinions toward homosexuality. Instead, they tend to draw a line between their real lives and their imaginations in slash fandom. Unlike Li's argument, other scholars believe that these queer-sensitive audiences show acceptance of the LGBTQ community (Moreno-Tabarez et al., 2014; Huang, 2016). According to Huang (2016), the prevalence of slash culture demonstrates that there is a sizable population in mainland China that is open to queerness. Slash fandom's actions could be interpreted as an affirmation of queer sexualities and a critique of prevailing heteronormative culture that could help create a more welcoming environment for the queer community.

However, to avoid being censored on Chinese television, ambiguous hints of homosexuality between male characters are subtly implied on screen. Chinese audiences jokingly refer to homoerotic relationships in Chinese TV dramas as “socialist brotherhood”, a reference to how on-screen homosexuality must be masked as bromances to comply with official state ideology (Zhou & Ewe, 2021). This approach is commonly referred to as queerbaiting. Queerbaiting is a strategy to hint at same-sex romance to attract an audience who enjoys queer content, but at the same time being too ambiguous to intimidate a broader audience that may be hostile to queer storylines. It maximises the audiences it attracts. Queerbaiting often takes the form of claiming devotion to LGBTQ visibility problems without actually delivering on that allegiance (Brennan, 2019); it is an industry tactic where “those officially associated with a media text court viewers interested in LGBTQ narratives... without the text ever definitely confirming the non-heterosexuality of the relevant characters” (Ng, 2017, pp.1-2). The queerbaiting strategy often rewards certain interpretations and ignores others, and in this way promotes a preferred reading. It is commonly considered exploitative: on the one hand, it takes up space that could be used to explicitly and positively represent LGBTQ communities; on the other hand, it uses queer subtext at the expense of the real queer community. The relationship between fans and producers has been defined as a big part of the queerbaiting strategy since it is an ongoing process where they react to and comment on each other’s actions. Such debates between fans and the show’s creators are often used to attract more attention from audiences and the media. However, queerbaiting in the Chinese context can be seen as a coping mechanism to feed the hunger of queer-sensitive audiences and at the same time avoid the censorship that does not allow on-screen scenes with homosexual elements.

2.4 Taste Hierarchy in Television Consumption

Selznick (2008) has charged that British television programmes are known as a combination of their heritage brand with a sense of “proper and upper-class culture” and a “mod” brand, which is more hip and current. It brings together two traditions of what is perceived as “quality TV”: the US style of high production values, layered narratives, and psychologically deep and complex characters; and the UK tradition of “prestige” through British cultural heritage and literary adaptation, which makes it able to compete in the global market (Evans, 2012). Early British TV dramas had a close connection to their roots in theatre. Having been long influenced by the BBC’s public service heritage, British TV tends to balance its entertainment content with “high cultural aspirations and seriousness” (Nelson, 2007, p.39). On the contrary, the American film and TV industry lacks a long tradition with heritage drama and quickly entered into commercial sectors producing “Hollywood Style” content driven by ratings (Nelsen, 2007). British TV dramas could succeed internationally with a different aesthetic style and narrative structure to the more typical Hollywood-style American TV dramas. Pearson (2019, p.8) argues that “British television dramas may perform well on the international market precisely because of the cultural premium derived from strong textual codes of national identity.” The heritage brand of British TV and its representation in costume dramas have always been seen as representing “culture”, “quality” (Chapman, 2014) and simply the best of Britain (Selznick, 2008).

As Brower (2002, p.171) suggests, quality TV is “something we anticipate before and savour after. It focuses more on relationships than on situations; it explores character, it enlightens, challenges, involves and confronts the viewer; it provokes thought and is remembered tomorrow”. Quality TV is expected to present socially relevant content with depth, and offering audiences thought-provoking content in a unique and expressive manner (Barker, 1997).

However, the notion of quality is tied to power dynamics and class-based taste hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984; Barker, 1997). As Feuer (2007, p145) argues, “the judgment of quality is always situated”. The judgments of quality TV are not universal but are historically and culturally specific, and they are interpreted differently based on the cultural background at where is it situated. The perception of whether a television series is considered quality or well-received is largely connected to the viewer’s life experience, social context, and political stance (Cardwell, 2007; Feuer, 2007).

Existing scholarship indicates what quality means for Chinese audiences is often considered “international” and “Western” (Elliott et al., 2018). Cultural products from developed countries are often considered high quality by consumers from developing countries (Elliott et al., 2018; Iwabuchi, 2002; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). As a result, the taste for foreign cultural products that are perceived as quality in China is often used as a social marker to distinguish oneself in the social hierarchy. Gao’s (2019) study on television taste among Chinese university students shows they all consider US and UK shows to be the most prestigious and well-made. Similarly, Zhu (2014) studied an online *Sherlock* forum and found that Chinese fans of British TV dramas consider themselves a “niche” community. They believe the culture, ideas, and tastes embodied in British TV drama are not to be decoded by all television viewers. The “niceness” of British TV dramas represents a higher level of taste and appreciation, which allows Chinese fans of British TV dramas to distinguish themselves from others. Jiang and Leung’s (2012, p.161) study share similarities with Zhu’s research: they argue that viewing foreign TV dramas could be “an index of social distinction in urban China”. They found that reasons connected to enhancing ones’ lifestyle, such as gaining social recognition and being an opinion leader from viewing foreign TV, are all contributing factors to the popularity of

American and Korean TV series in China. Therefore, here raises the question of whether a taste hierarchy of British TV dramas is used as a means of symbolic indicator for social distinction.

2.5 Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Consumption

The consumption of foreign cultural products that are out of one's origin is associated with the concept of cosmopolitanism (Szerszynski & Urry, 2002; Vertovec & Cohen, 2002; Beck, 2006; Olofsson & Öhman, 2007). Lee and Song (2017) suggested that cosmopolitan imagination in China mainly comes from the ideology of consumption, as having a taste and understanding of foreign products, and "aspirationalism", which centres around upward social mobility. The elites' efforts to transcend the local and dominate the discourse on legitimate culture by consuming foreign cultural products are closely connected to the uneven modernisation process and economic, social, and cultural capital among people (Delanty, 2006). Yan's (2009) study supports this and argues that young Chinese who have higher cultural and economic capital actively use the consumption of cultural products to maintain social status and adopt practices for a different lifestyle, following trends of fashion and taste from foreign countries.

Findings on foreign TV dramas in China show that audiences are generally well-educated with high socio-economic capital (Jiang & Leung, 2012; Hsiao, 2014a; Zhang, 2020). Gao (2020) studied the television tastes of Chinese students from an elite university in Beijing and found that the taste for Western culture is closely connected to upbringing and international experiences. Li (2020) studied the rise of taste in cultural consumption in China and suggested that a high-status culture is emerging with rising inequality. Li (2020) argued that foreign culture is first embraced by the privileged in China, resulting in it occupying a position of status,

allowing distinctions to be made. Thus, “high culture” no longer refers solely to traditional highbrow culture but increasingly refers to Western cultural products in China.

The transnational flow of material goods, global cultural products, and consumerism have increased Chinese people’s awareness of individual rights and the outside world. Individuals can break away from the constraints of social groups and find new ways of self-development in a new social setting. Drawing boundaries between themselves and the “lower others” enables a favourable symbolic social hierarchy from which they benefit. This distinction, as Gao (2016) suggests, has facilitated the practice of “symbolic violence”, a concept introduced by Bourdieu (1984). Symbolic violence refers to non-physical violence reflected in the power disparity between social groups, leading to an unintentional reinforcement of the legitimation and domination of power. Gao (2016) discovers that Chinese audiences judge others based on their taste in television. In particular, Western TV is considered prestigious, while local and Korean dramas are seen to be on the low-end of the spectrum.

China's transformation from an agrarian society to an industrialized one within a few decades after the Reform and Opening-Up policy has not only intensified social inequality but also led to a perceived contradiction of traditional customs and modernity, leaving the country marked by growing cultural contrasts and contradictions (Feng, 2012). The rapid development of China in terms of marketisation frames the demand for identity construction and assertion (Fung & Ma, 2002; Osburg, 2013; Li, 2020; Zhang, 2020). Zhang (2020) argues that Chinese class factions differentiate themselves from others through deliberate calculation. The Chinese middle class cautiously uses their cultural capital to exhibit their taste. Previous studies show that a growing number of Chinese people with high socio-economic status seek “badges” as reputation currency (Osburg, 2013). Fung and Ma (2002, p.74) argued that the new rich in

China use “conspicuous consumption” to express their newfound identity through explicitly tangible and symbolic indicators. Conspicuous consumption is a concept raised by Veblen about the practice of upper-class spending on luxury goods for the purpose of displaying wealth (1994). As a result, people from lower social classes often mimic the consumption habits of the elite to claim the social ladder. This is true to some extent in the Chinese context, as shown by several studies on the consumption habits of wealthy elites in China. Osburg (2013) argues elite Chinese businesspeople were concerned about their social position and employed a variety of social rituals to help their peers recognise them. As groups of China’s new wealthy class began to travel more widely and better understand European and American cultures, they opted to settle in locally-based foreign-themed living compounds (more in Chapter 4) to flaunt their wealth, power, and earning status (Osburg, 2013). While previous research on cultural consumption and material goods in China mainly focuses on the conspicuous consumption of the wealthy and upper class and the stigmatisation of the lower class, the impact of an individual’s values, beliefs, and living environment on cultural consumption is largely overlooked (Weber, 1978; Kuang & Liu, 2012; Li, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to consider individuals within their social and life contexts to understand the different meanings that British TV dramas hold for them. Moreover, it is worth questioning whether people consume British TV dramas to accumulate foreign culture and knowledge as a means of upward social mobility in a rapidly globalizing society.

2.6 Digital Mobility and Cultural Consumption

Cosmopolitanism is closely related to mobility, including physical transnational travels, and digital/virtual mobility which is associated with communication or media consumption via television or the Internet (Szerszynski & Urry, 2002; Olofsson & Öhman, 2007; Petzold, 2017).

Mobility can allow one to be exposed to different cultures, values, and worldviews that are different than one's own. Petzold (2017) argues that virtual mobility can facilitate cultural openness to foreign cultures, however, might create a more superficial engagement with distant others compare to physical mobility. Lobato (2017) studied how viewers with different levels of digital mobility bypass geoblocking by using proxies or VPNs. He found that the ability to overcome digital barriers varies among them. Class, education and technological competency play a significant role in accessing cultural products, which means people with more resources and skills are more likely to be able to access to more media content (Cruz, 2008; Lobato, 2017). Digital mobility here refers to the ability to access digital space often beyond geographical restrictions, which can become an increasingly important dynamic in the future as a growing amount of viewings are happening online, especially on streaming platforms (Lobato, 2017).

In this study, the notion of “digital mobility” is employed as the primary lens through which to examine the dynamics of Internet and media mobility. Digital mobility here refers to the capacity to move across the internet for media consumption, which requires means of financial support of owning digital devices, the technical skills to “jump the Great Firewall of China” to search for a broader range of information, and the cultural knowledge of being able to decode foreign information (Jiang & Leung, 2012). This selection is primarily driven by two factors. First, the prevalence of network-based watching habits underscores the importance of digital mobility in British TV drama consumption patterns. Second, the understanding that different volumes of digital mobility can influence levels of engagement with British TV dramas and foreign media content makes digital mobility an important research area. Given the variability in digital mobility can potentially affect audience engagement with British content, more research is required to understand in which way digital mobility shapes the consumption and

interpretation of British television drama in China. Therefore, I argue that digital mobility should be considered a significant privilege in understanding transnational TV dramas in China, as unequal digital capacity determines who has access to and potentially gatekeeps the foreign cultural products distributed in China.

Annette Hill (2018) research highlights the unequal access and power dynamic within popular culture products globally. She argued that “illegal audiences” should not be considered pirates who commit crimes in receiving illegal content. They should be considered users who use formal and informal ways to access media content. Similarly, Hsiao’s (2014a) research on Chinese fandom’s transgressive practices in translating unlicensed US TV found that Chinese fans perceive their unlicensed subtitling work as public service under the existing censorship and social conditions. In China, censorship has caused the uneven reception of foreign products among audiences. Being able to access foreign cultural products requires specific technical skills, such as being able to evade censorship to receive foreign cultural content (Li, 2021). Previous studies have suggested that censorship and reducing access to information work well in restricting information and discouraging people from participating in activities that the government considers unfavourable (Lessig, 1999; Morozov, 2011; Enikolopov et al., 2011; Edmond, 2013). As a result, citizens access what is available to them in the media and do not discuss alternative information with others due to a lack of trust and uncertainty about what others believe (Kuran, 1997; Stockmann, 2013; Geddes & Zaller, 1989; Chen & Yang, 2019). However, Hobbs and Roberts (2018) suggest that censorship’s effect on people is not necessarily equal. Some people can quickly adapt to it and find ways to access censored information. They argue that sudden censorship could even lead to increased interest in learning how to access blocked objectionable information, which might eventually expose users to more sets of information that have been long censored or blocked before.

While existing studies on the reception of British TV dramas in China have examined the interpretation and media use of TV content, these studies have failed to demonstrate convincing evidence of the association between censorship and the reception of British TV dramas in China. Moreover, there is a significant lack of research examining the reception of British content within China's social-political context from a critical perspective, as well as the phenomenon of queer readings associated with British TV dramas. Therefore, the subsequent theoretical framework offers an analytical model to examine how British TV dramas are received in China, aiming to contribute to these under-researched areas.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

Several valuable themes related to the research questions of this study have emerged from the preceding literature review, which has informed the development of this theoretical framework (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Tracy, 2018). This section introduces a theoretical guide for examining television reception and cultural consumption in a society shaped by digital and media constraints. Drawing on Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital and distinction, along with concepts from cosmopolitanism and cultivation studies, this theoretical framework investigates how audiences receive and appropriate British television dramas within China's social-political context. In particular, Bourdieu's (1984) concept of capital and its surrounding debates offer an analytical tool to understand television taste and cultural consumption in Chinese society. Prior research points to a pattern of the Chinese attributing a higher cultural and social status to Western culture (Fung & Ma, 2002; Osburg, 2013). Given this, Bourdieu's concept becomes an essential framework for studying if preferences for British TV dramas are viewed as symbolic indicators of social distinction and aspiration for higher social standing. Furthermore, Bourdieu's cultural capital concept also works together with proximity/discount

theory to study the transnational appeals of British TV dramas in China. It helps to examine whether audiences with high cultural capital develop a taste for British content despite the cultural and language barriers, and how they negotiate with the cultural differences they are confronted with.

In the current context of amplified globalisation and burgeoning internet technologies, an influx of foreign cultural products has become more accessible in China. This has allowed Chinese audiences to gain exposure to foreign cultures, potentially leading to the adoption of foreign values and ideologies. Therefore, this study adopts cosmopolitanism study for it offers valuable insights into investigating whether British television dramas might serve as a cultural vehicle for accumulating global cultural capital. As existing studies suggest the close connection between Bourdieu's cultural capital and cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitan elites are common among people with high cultural capital. Therefore, cosmopolitanism helps to investigate how individuals with different volumes of cultural capital and education level engage with British TV content. In the latter section, cultivation theory helps to examine whether any values and beliefs are being adopted in the process of the consumption of British TV dramas, and how audiences negotiate with the newly adopted ideas and attitudes (if any). Overall, this theoretical framework lays the groundwork for a more profound exploration of the British TV dramas phenomenon in China, thereby paving the way to a more in-depth understanding of the findings and discussions in Chapters 5 and 6.

2.7.1 Bourdieu's Work on Cultural Capital and Distinction

Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) is recognised as one of the most influential sociological works. Although his work concerned French society in the 1960s, the concepts he raised about *habitus*

and *capital* are still relevant to understand the relationship between social structures and individual practices. *Disposition* is a key component to understanding his concept of *habitus* and its surrounding debates. Disposition refers to the tendencies that direct an individual's actions, thinking and perception of the world, which is based on life experiences and social environment (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). *Habitus* refers to a learned set of dispositions, agencies and practices (Bourdieu, 1984). It represents internalised patterns, systems of perception, thought, and action shared by all members of the same group or class. Habitus is rooted in family upbringings and shaped by an individual's position in the social structure. It generates perceptions and practices that individuals encounter in early social experiences. The dispositions of habitus manifest through different aspects of human behaviour, such as linguistics, verbal and non-verbal communication, taste, values, preferences, interpretations and modes of reasoning (Swartz, 1997). It is a durable, transposable system that shapes how people navigate in a stratified society.

Bourdieu argues that *habitus* and *capital* are interconnected in reproducing social structures and inequalities. He refers to the concept of capital as “the principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world” (p241, 1986). Bourdieu (1984) argues that capital is a power that inscribed in objective or subjective structures. In his theory, cultural capital is closely connected to upbringing and education, which could be achieved through cultural practices such as museum visiting, arts, music, and length of education; social capital is mainly based on family background and the connections one has; and economic capital is the financial resources one obtains. Unlike social and economic capital, cultural capital encompasses socially rare and distinctive tastes, skills, knowledge, and practices (Holt, 1998). As a result, taste and consumption emerge as symbolic battlegrounds for increasing symbolic value and competition for status, which Bourdieu refers to as symbolic capital.

Bourdieu argues that taste serves as an indicator of social class (1984). “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier (Bourdieu 1984, p34).” Taste is the preference for cultural goods and practices, which is heavily influenced by social background. Taste is used as a social marker to distinguish between high and low, quality and vulgarity (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu (1984) views cultural consumption as a marker to reinforce status boundaries, which elites use to defend their closed social networks and lifestyles and the distinctiveness of their consumption. He proposes that an individual’s taste and preferences in goods serve as marker of their social class. By associating themselves with perceived high-ranking prestigious goods (e.g., arts, clothing) and practices (e.g., hobbies, activities), individuals can achieve a sense of distinction or status. This often reinforces existing class divisions, as those with higher economic capital are generally more capable of accessing goods and practices deemed high-status. Therefore, taste and consumption of cultural goods reflect a social hierarchy of consumers, which functions as “markers of class” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.1). This hierarchy is determined by the social class structure and maintained by the dominant class to distinguish themselves from the lower classes in society – to maintain cultural hegemony. The higher class maintains social distinction by deciding what is legitimate culture and how it should be properly consumed.

Several studies have drawn on Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and studied the connection between cultural consumption and social distinction. De Solier (2005) proposed that cooking shows play a role in reinforcing class differences through culinary taste. These shows serve as platforms for teaching cooking techniques and provide taste knowledge of ideological food preferences. This accumulated cultural capital then can be utilized by viewers for social distinction. Studies on quality TV show that watching quality TV can be perceived as more valuable than conventional TV because the quality content carries more cultural status, thus bearing symbolic value (Newman & Levine, 2012; Schlütz et al., 2018). For instance, the

“it’s not TV, it’s HBO” branding strategy promote its content as superior and exclusive, and its subscribers as quality audience. This allows subscribers to distinguish themselves from conventional television consumers, reinforcing class distinction through cultural consumption choices (Schlütz et al., 2018).

Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital is challenged by Peterson and Simkus’s (1992) studies of the changing patterns in cultural consumption in the US from the 1980s to the 1990s. Their study shows that what used to be considered legitimate and traditional high culture is no longer exclusive to the higher upper class. The cultural consumption of high-status elites is not limited to fine arts, but has shifted to consume a wider range of products. The elites are increasingly willing to consume both highbrow and lowbrow culture, which refers to as being “cultural omnivores” (Peterson & Simkus 1992). The concept of cultural omnivore prompts debates into re-evaluating the relationship between class, taste, and cultural consumption. Maguire (2015) argues that globalisation, the expansion of higher education, and the commercialisation of highbrow culture all increased the accessibility to diverse cultural practices and what used to be elite culture. Evolving research has suggested that the concepts of cultural omnivore and Bourdieu’s cultural capital are interconnected, both function to demonstrate social distinction in society (Lindell & Danielsson, 2017; Straubhaar et al., 2022). However, as Newman (2012) points out, it would be unrealistic to believe that social divisions through cultural tastes could disappear, especially in societies that are highly stratified and defined by advanced consumer capitalism. Being “omnivorous” does not indicate a reduction in cultural hierarchies, instead, it can be seen as a further refinement of the ways in which individual and social groups differentiate themselves from those who have more limited cultural tastes. Therefore, considering the symbolic image British television dramas carry as industry and previous studies suggest (Chapters 2 and 4), this study adopts Bourdieu’s cultural capital for it provides a more

systematic framework to study television consumption in China, as symbolic values and social standing still play a very important role in cultural consumption in China.

Bourdieu's concepts have also faced criticism. Fiske (1992, p.32) has pointed out that Bourdieu's model overlooks economics and class structures, and has failed to examine factors like gender, race and age – elements critical to discussions of social discrimination. Filed (2003) has criticised Bourdieu's theory for overemphasising the role of social capital based on kinship and ignoring the relation of effect in his considerations. He argues that “some people like (and dislike) each other more than others, even though they may move in the same cultural world and share the same attitudes” (Filed, 2003 p18). Zhang (2020) criticises Bourdieu's concepts of class and habitus for neglecting cultural backgrounds in non-Western countries, and argues that Chinese social groups differentiate themselves through conscious calculation rather than habitus, due to historical and cultural factors such as Cultural Revolution and Confucianism.

To address these shortcomings, this study engages Bourdieu's concepts of *cultural capital* and *distinction* as a crucial lens through which to explore if the consumption of British TV dramas in China is indeed a matter of taste and distinction. It takes into consideration aspects such as censorship, digital mobility, and individual life circumstances. This is particularly relevant as an increasing number of policies impose restraints on media content and Internet access, consequently shaping people's foreign media consumption habits and information reception methods – a factor often overlooked in previous studies. As Bourdieu (1986, p245) argues, “any given cultural competence... derives a scarcity value from its position in the distribution of cultural capital and yields profits of distinction for its owner”. In a society marked by information and media limitations, only those individuals possessing cultural capital (language capacity, cultural awareness) and digital mobility (access to digital devices, access to foreign

media platforms via VPN) can access a wider spectrum of foreign media and global culture, thereby gaining further cultural capital. This exclusive capital, accessible only to a selection portion of society, can potentially offer them social advantages, further intensifying social stratification.

2.7.2 Cosmopolitanism as Cultural Capital

This section delves into previous studies on cosmopolitanism, explores the interconnection between cosmopolitan capital and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, and examines the role played by digital mobility and media consumption in enabling cosmopolitanism virtually within the context of China's information-restrained environment. While Bourdieu's concepts provide a crucial framework for understanding the connection between cultural consumption and social stratification, cosmopolitanism adds another layer to examine these concepts on a global scale. This is particularly relevant when examining whether the consumption of foreign cultural products in China is used as crucial knowledge to gain advantages in a rapidly globalising world and further social divisions. The concept of cosmopolitanism sheds light on whether the consumption of British TV dramas enables the cosmopolitan imagination among Chinese audiences in relation to British culture, society, and values. Additionally, it further explores whether culturally privileged Chinese audiences employ British TV dramas as a means to acquire cosmopolitan capital, thereby perpetuating their privileged status. Cosmopolitan capital can be recognised as a set of recourses that improves life chances and social standing.

Overall, the cosmopolitan view is generally understood as openness to the world outside one's own community (Szerszynski & Urry, 2002; Vertovec & Cohen, 2002; Beck, 2006; Olofsson

& Öhman, 2007). Ulf Hannerz's "*Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture*" (1990) explores the distinguishing traits of cosmopolitans in a world of accelerating globalisation and fast-evolving transnational cultures. He argued that cosmopolitanism is "an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity". Beck (2006) sees cosmopolitanism as an alternative kind of imagination, one that imagines different ways of life and rationalities while taking into account the otherness of the other. It is a "global sense, a sense of boundarylessness... the possibility of shaping one's life and social relations under conditions of cultural mixture" (Beck, 2006, p.3). All actions, political, economic, scientific, and social, are centred on the negotiation of opposing cultural experiences.

More studies have drawn on Bourdieu's concept of capital to examine how cultural capital and cosmopolitanism work on a global level (Igarashi & Saito, 2014; Straubhaar & et al., 2022). Woodward et al. (2008) argue that an individual's disposition is shaped by the cultural background and wider social structures one is situated. It shapes how you interpret and interact with the world, and can encourage you to adopt the ability to comprehend and embrace different cultures, having an international outlook. In other words, to become a cosmopolitan of the world. Hannerz (1990) referred to Kadushin's (1974) studies, whereby the relationship between intellectuals and cosmopolitanism is closely connected. Intellectuals adopt the skills of identifying the relationship of values and concepts, thus having an advantage in exploring other cultures when the opportunity arises.

Delanty (2006) suggests cosmopolitanism can be seen as the elites' rejection of the low culture to become a citizen of the world. Thus, cosmopolitanism is a vision of hope to distinguish oneself from the mass and surpass the local by imagining one's global knowledge and cultural

competency. It is deeply rooted in global economic inequalities and power imbalances. Friedman (2000) highlights cosmopolitanism in the global inequality context, arguing that social and cultural elites demonstrate globalisation of class structure with increasing self-consciousness of their world position. He argues that cosmopolitanism should be studied in a local context. He claims that the transnationalism of global cultural goods results in polarisation of the cosmopolitans and the less “worldly” locals and defined the former as progressive and the latter as backwards. Therefore, cosmopolitanism should not only be considered as the moral value of openness to the foreign, but a reputational currency for social distinction (Calhoun, 2003, 2008; Harvey, 2009; McEwan & Sobre-Denton, 2011; Igarashi and Saito, 2014; Weenink, 2008).

Evolving research suggest cosmopolitanism should be understood as a form of cultural capital valued in one’s domestic context (Weenink, 2008; Igarashi and Saito, 2014; Lindell & Danielsson, 2017; Straubhaar & et al., 2022). Similar to cultural capital, cosmopolitan capital refers to internalized embodied social assets, resources, and skills that one can leverage and engage in transnational activities. Some scholars have argued that cosmopolitan capital helps individuals to maintain or improve their social standing in an increasingly globalized context (Kim 2011; Weenink 2008). For instance, Weenink considers cosmopolitanism as habitus and refers to cosmopolitan capital as social and cultural capital. However, Igarashi and Saito (2014) criticised Weenink’s (2008) proposition for its lack of rigor in explaining how Bourdieu’s capital (cultural, social and economic) can be interconverted, which consequently hinders systematically applying Bourdieu’s concepts in studying cosmopolitanism. Nevertheless, they agree with Kim’s (2011) suggestion of treating cosmopolitan capital as a new form of global cultural capital. This perspective helps in understanding how cosmopolitanism is perceived in global stratification.

Another perspective that focuses on the connections between cosmopolitanism, popular culture, and digital media is “virtual cosmopolitanism” or “banal cosmopolitanism” (Robbins, 1998, Szerszynski & Urry, 2002). Szerszynski and Urry (2002) argue that media enables people to travel “virtually” and provides the capacity to recognise and interpret other cultural codes. McEwan and Sobre-Denton (2011) argued that digital technology has greatly facilitated the formation of “virtual cosmopolitanism”. Unlike other forms of cultural expression, virtual third cultures exist outside of any physical location. In virtual spaces, many cultural influences might collide, resulting in an international, multicultural, third space, hybridised global citizenship. These areas have the potential to transcend national, ethnic, and racial borders (McEwan & Sobre-Denton, 2011). Such imaginary travels enabled by television viewing are the basis of “banal cosmopolitanism”, which is the awareness of others in a global setting (Robbins, 1998). Beck (2002) described banal cosmopolitanism as globalisation embedded in everyday life. Transnational television and online communities such as fan groups could facilitate the formation of banal cosmopolitanism, enabling communication and awareness of “others” and foreign cultures beyond national borders. Although mediated communication such as on-demand television could limit content addressing specific issues based on its tailored content, it offers people opportunities to imagine themselves in a globalised world. In the concept of banal cosmopolitanism, one does not need to travel to foreign countries or have direct engagement with individuals from different cultural backgrounds to become cosmopolitan. Lindell and Danielsson (2017, p51) suggest that “media may allow one to cultivate cosmopolitan capital”. They found that socially privileged young men in Sweden engage in cosmopolitan media practices to convert their cultural capital into cosmopolitan capital as it has become a recognisable social asset in the globalising world. These findings are in line with Bourdieu’s (1984) studies suggesting the socially privileged have more resources to accumulate cosmopolitan capital to remain privileged. This circumstance prompts inquiries

into the extent to which Chinese audiences with different volumes of cultural capital intend to acknowledge and utilize cosmopolitan cultural capital through their engagement with media productions.

As some would argue that everybody can potentially be more cosmopolitan by consuming foreign media products, opportunities to access these media content are tied to pre-existing economic resources and education (Lindell & Danielsson, 2017; Lobato, 2017). As Lobato suggests (2017), differential access to digital mobility is closely related to class, education, and technology competency. These impediments have ramifications for who is eligible for virtual cosmopolitan status, thus making cosmopolitanism seem elitist (McEwan & Sobre-Denton, 2011). For instance, Netflix was initially limited to a group of elite audiences in Latin America due to a lack of Internet penetration to the mass population in the area (Straubhaar et al., 2022). The ability to enter virtual environments has been criticised as intrinsically privileged, as it requires specific cultural and economic resources, such as technical savvy, suitable language abilities, and particular intercultural awareness (Kaufmann, 2002; Cruz, 2008; Lobato, 2017). Such resources are especially crucial in information-restricted regions such as China, as digital resources and mobility are heavily imbalanced and can cause uneven access to information. Based on the media environment and information restraints that are composed in Chinese society, it is safe to say that one's capacity to access, appropriate, and adopt global culture and foreign values is closely connected to one's ability to access information online. Given the censorship applied on foreign cultural products in China (Chapter 1), this thesis argues that what provides distinction to the elite class in China, is not limited to education qualification, taste, and family upbringings, but increasingly to one's digital mobility that grants access to broader global platforms and transnational cultural productions.

The concept of cosmopolitan capital in the social-political context of Chinese society is crucial to understand the consumption and reception of British TV dramas in China. In this study, cosmopolitanism is considered a cultural disposition for the preferences of consuming British content to reach global culture. The emergence of British TV dramas as a prominent cultural phenomenon in China has sparked a profound fascination and captivation among Chinese audiences, thereby facilitating broader accessibility to British culture, society, and heritage in China. As outlined in the first, second and fourth chapters, existing research and industry commentators suggest the viewership of British TV dramas predominantly consists of Chinese individuals who possess a substantial reservoir of cultural knowledge and sophistication. This raised the questions of how do these audiences encounter the foreign culture they are confronted with? Do audiences use British TV dramas to accumulate cosmopolitan capital for social distinction, global connection or to compensate their lack of social, cultural, and economic capital? To answer these questions, the concept of cosmopolitanism as cultural capital helps to shed lights on whether Chinese audiences use media practices, in particular the consumption of British television dramas, to accumulate cosmopolitan capital and adopt foreign lifestyles and values in a globalizing world. Working together with Bourdieu's cultural capital concept, it helps further demonstrate whether cosmopolitan capital is utilised to demonstrate social distinction in one's local community among viewers of British television dramas. Furthermore, the concept of cosmopolitan capital provides a theoretical grounding to explore whether and to what extent digital mobility has facilitated social distinction in China, which is overlooked in previous research.

2.7.3 Cultivation Study

While cultural capital and cosmopolitanism studies provide valuable insights into the social and cultural aspects of studying the reception of British TV dramas in China, cultivation theory offers perspectives on the potential psychological effects of exposure to the values and lifestyles presented in British content. As Susanne Eichner (2022) argues, Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of cultural capital and habitus offer a nuanced understanding of media effects, such as cultivation theory, as an interplay between media, society, and individuals. Cultural capital and habitus created a space of possibilities that enables dispositions and agency. Thus, television offers materials that we can use to shape our social realities and build our worldview. This becomes especially significant when addressing research questions 2 and 5, which explore how Chinese audiences engage with the ideologies and beliefs they are confronted with in British TV dramas, including the notable phenomenon of queer reading particularly associated with these dramas. These questions should be examined within the context of the individual's sociocultural environment.

Several studies of media consumption have found that frequent exposure to common themes in media texts would likely impact a viewer's perspectives of the world, leading to concurrence to values such as morality, friendship, and personal values that are embedded in the narratives (Slater & Elliott, 1982; Gerbner, 1998; Pfau et al., 1995; Shanahan, et al., 1999; Gerbner et al., 2002; Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017). Cultivation theory refers to the media's impact on audiences, especially television audiences. It focuses on the long-term formation of values and beliefs about the world due to media content exposure. Initially raised by Gerbner (1969), the theory was first used to study the impact of violence on television on its audiences. Cultivation theorists suggested that heavy television users have a higher tendency to accept things that reflect social reality as presented on television (Gerbner, 1969; Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

Exposure to television and a lack of direct contact with many real-world issues combine to produce an artificial reality that seems increasingly real to the audiences. For instance, previous studies show that those who watch lots of television believe that violence and crime are more widespread in the actual world than those who watch less (Hawkins & Pingree, 1980, 1981; Shrum, 2001; Shrum & Bischak, 2001). However, Potter (1990) and Hawkins and Pingree (1981) criticised Gerbner and his associates' (1976) arguments about cultivation effects from overall television exposure as being homogenous, unselective and ritualistic. Although there is evidence that some levels of cultivation effects exist, it ignores variables such as individuals' perception of realities.

Departing from the conventional cultivation theory as proposed by Gerbner (1969), Gunter (1994) pointed out that the cultivation effect could be bonded to a specific genre or programme rather than the outcome of total viewership. Cohen and Weimann (2000) built on Gunter's argument and further examined genre effects on the viewer characteristics of Israeli teenagers. They suggest that demographic variables such as gender, age, and religiosity are also crucial in comprehending the cultivation effect. In particular, they found that heavily viewing teenagers from religious homes are less likely to be cultivated by the values and beliefs in television programmes. Previous studies drawing on genre-specific cultivation studies have examined the connection between media consumption and attitudes toward same-sex relationships. Walters (1994) and Riggle et al. (1996) observed a positive lift in attitudes toward LGBTQ communities after exposure to media portraying them in distressing situations or as prominent figure. However, Levina et al. (2000) and Tu and Lee (2014) observed frequent exposure to negative portrayals of same-sex relationships in Chinese media led to more negative attitudes. Feng and Luo (2022) found that more exposure to dramas featuring same-sex relationship foster more tolerant attitudes toward LGBTQ communities in China. Taken

together, this further emphasises the importance of drawing a more comprehensive selection of genres of television dramas to avoid bias and thus have a deeper understanding of Chinese audiences' engagement with British TV content.

Several studies based on the relationship between viewing motives and cultivation effects have achieved contradicting results. Carveth and Alexander (1985) discovered that audiences who watch soap operas for ritualistic reasons had greater cultivation effects than those who watch for instrumental gratification. Perse (1986) and Valkenburg and Patiwael (1998) found that active and instrumental viewing has a reinforcing impact on cultivation effects. Genres, beliefs, and social context could all be the contributing factors that cause such contradictory results. Therefore, the inter-relations between television consumption and the protentional cultivation effect should be tested in the social context of the audiences to understand how they negotiate with the values they are confronted with from their television consumption.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has examined existing studies on the reception of transnational television studies, taste hierarchy in television consumption, and the relationship between cosmopolitanism, digital mobility, and cultural consumption. Following the research questions, this thesis adopts Bourdieu's studies on cultural capital and distinction, cosmopolitanism, and cultivation theory as its central framework. This provides a valuable theoretical model for understanding the construction of social distinction and cultural consumption in the social-political context of Chinese society. In particular, Bourdieu's concepts and their surrounding debates are used to test research questions 1, 2 and 3. I investigate how Chinese audiences receive British TV dramas; whether a taste hierarchy of television dramas is formed that is seen as means of social

distinction. The cosmopolitanism and cultivation theory are used to answer questions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5: I hope to understand how Chinese audiences make sense of the significance, values, and cultures in British TV dramas; whether any values and beliefs have been adopted during the consumption.

However, we must always consider one's cultural and social context when determining whether cultural capital may be used to further one's social standing and upward social mobility. In the case of China, we need to consider cosmopolitanism and cultural consumption in three parts. First, we should not ignore the backdrop of imagined modernity in developed countries, as foreign products are considered "modern" and "international" (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999; Iwabuchi, 2002; Elliott et al., 2018; Straubhaar & et al. 2022). Second, the media restrictions on foreign cultural products should not be ignored as they pose a potential impact on limitation of accessibility to foreign knowledge, and thus further distinguish social classes. Cultural knowledge of foreign values and social practices has become an essential means of compensating for people's lack of social, cultural and economic capital (Yan, 2020). Third, further investigations are needed to examine whether Chinese audiences are living cosmopolitan lives through foreign cultural products in pursuing global connection, individualism and personal identification. Thus, I argue that the rising imbalance caused by unequal digital mobility and resources among people plays an important role in social distinction in China. In particular, the consumption of British TV dramas becomes a cultural vehicle for social distinction and cosmopolitan imagination.

Chapter 3: Methodology

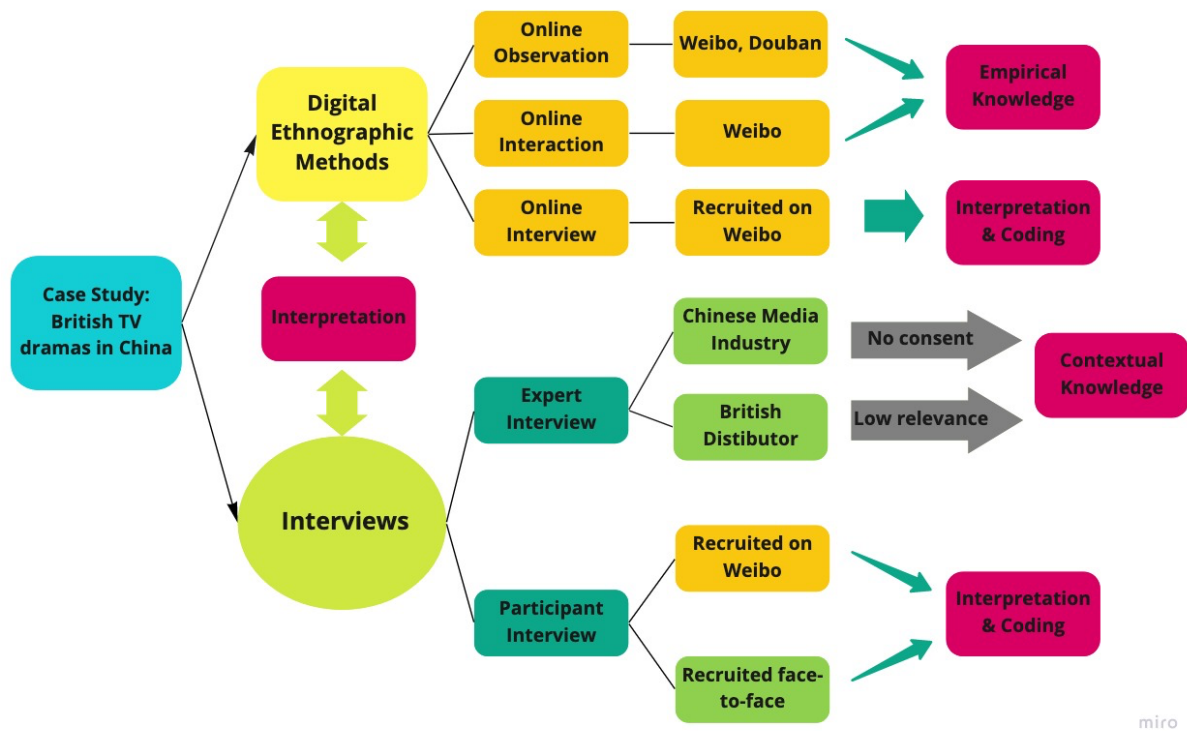


Figure 1: Map of methodology development

3.1 Development of Methodology

The overall aim of this chapter is to introduce the methodological approach, the data analysis, and the problems I encountered that shaped my research journey in a transparent manner. My research position is based on qualitative ethnographic media research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Yin, 2009; Tracy, 2013, 2018; Pink, 2016; Hine, 2017, 2020; Silverman, 2020). I position myself in a constructivist paradigm to construct knowledge by studying the individual's perception and engagement of British TV dramas in China. Following scholarships (Hine, 2017; Tracy, 2018; Yin, 2009) on conducting ethnography works in an online and offline setting, giving as much voice to my participants is essential to understanding their lived experiences and worldview. Doing so enabled me to examine the participants'

interpretations and engagement with media texts within the social and cultural context of Chinese society on a deeper level. In order to meet these aims, this research has employed mixed qualitative methods, including a case study, digital ethnographic methods and interviews; and used Sarah Tracy's (2018) primary and secondary cycle coding for data processing, as they offer an effective way of studying cultural phenomena in-depth. It is important to note that part of the interview data was deliberately not used in this study to protect the safety of the participants, as portions of their answers could be seen as politically-sensitive and or radical.

British TV dramas was used as a crucial case study to investigate how audiences interpret and engage with foreign cultural products in the social context of Chinese society. Gerring (2004, p.341) defines a case study as “an in-depth study of a single unit (a relatively bounded phenomenon)”. It is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 1981, p.59; 2009). The reasons for using British TV dramas as a case study in this thesis are threefold. Firstly, British TV dramas have gained huge popularity in China since 2010 and have occupied a significant reputation among young Chinese audiences. Previous studies about the reception of British TV dramas exist but mainly focus on university students and urban elites, and textual analysis of certain dramas (Chapter 2). More studies are needed to understand how Chinese audiences engage with British TV dramas under media policies and censorship. Secondly, British TV dramas are a great example of demonstrating how media policies can both facilitate and hinder the distribution of foreign content as its early and peak performance period has been caught in the transition of media regulations in 2013-2014 (Chapters 1 and 4). Thirdly, the study of queer readings of British TV dramas in China is largely overlooked in transnational TV reception studies. In China, LGBTQ themes are restricted in cultural products and popular culture; the significant attention

on British TV dramas could convey civic values as they challenge China's current state policies towards homosexuality. Therefore, this case study aims to study the real-life phenomenon in depth in connection to its contextual conditions. The audiences I have observed and recruited in this study include fans and audiences who consume British TV dramas as a whole.

As such, I aim to examine the following research questions (1 and 2) and sub-questions (3, 4 and 5):

1. What are the reasons for the popularity of British television dramas among Chinese audiences?

I aim to explore the transnational appeals of British TV dramas in China, in terms of perceived production quality, themes, values, and beliefs.

2. How do Chinese audiences engage with the significance of British TV dramas?

In particular, I hope to understand audiences' media engagement and sense-making of British TV dramas. How do Chinese audiences deal with the cultural differences (if any), values, social matters that they are confronted with?

3) In which way is British TV drama seen as symbolic capital for social distinction and upward mobility?

Do people judge others on their taste in television dramas? Is the consumption of British TV dramas used as means of social distinction?

4) As most of the viewing happens online, particularly on pirate channels, how do people reflect on their transgressive behaviour in relation to existing media policy?

I aim to investigate whether audiences prefer to watch British TV dramas via official streaming services or pirate channels such as fan subtitle group websites (Chapter 4), and why they choose this option. Do they see the latter as copyright infringement? How do they view the existing media regulations on foreign AV programmes?

5) Do the engagements with British TV dramas carry potential civic values?

Do the values in British TV dramas prompt Chinese audiences to reflect on their lives and society? Do the queer readings of British TV dramas (Chapter 4) articulate reflections on social issues?

I used an iterative approach to study the existing phenomenon of British TV dramas in China (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Tracy, 2018). The iterative approach refers to the process by which a researcher “alternates between considering existing theories and research interests on the one hand, emergent qualitative data on the other” (Tracy, 2018, p.8). As such, I had pre-engaged theories in mind while examining data and adjusted my theoretical approach and methodology accordingly. In this way, I was able to construct a relevant theoretical framework with “existing knowledge and previously formed ideas about complex phenomena”, while studying the actual insights provided by the data (Collins & Stockton, 2018, p2).

I carried out a “separated text” writing strategy in constructing Chapters 4, 5 and 6 (Tracy, 2018, p.264). The separated text approach means to separate analysis and theoretical discussions, and is widely used in case studies research (Keyton & Schockley-Zalabak, 2009). I aim to bring out the phenomenon, concepts, theories, and implications in an evocative way (Ellet, 2007). I first introduce the case study that illustrates the phenomenon and problems in Chapter 4. I write this in a descriptive way with little scholarly language so that it will be easily understood by general readers and professionals (Ellet, 2007; Tracy, 2018). I then discuss the

findings based on the thematic coding in Chapters 5 and 6 with theoretical engagement and considerations of research questions and implications of the thesis.

I have included a brief introduction to four popular British TV dramas, *Sherlock*, *Downton Abbey*, *Fleabag* and *Skins* (Chapter 4). The brief introduction includes the storylines, main characters and relevant events, along with cultural phenomena associated with them. These TV dramas were chosen for two primary reasons. Firstly, they are frequently quoted and referenced by participants in the interviews. Secondly, they represent different genres, and therefore potentially embody the varying characteristics, appeals, and values of British TV drama to a greater extent. However, it is important to note that some examples (*Sherlock* and *Downton Abbey*) have more data to work with than others (*Fleabag* and *Skins*). This is because some were viewed by most participants due to their overwhelming popularity, and others were only viewed by selected participants. *Sherlock*, for instance, also has more cultural significance due to its queer reading phenomenon in China. Overall, each of these dramas provides valuable perspectives for examining the reception of British content among participants.

In the following section, I explain the trajectory of my research journey and the problems I encountered along the way. Then I continue to discuss the data analysis, limitations, and ethical considerations. An introductory summary of each participant is included at the end of this chapter. The participants recruited in this research all came from Mainland China. Moreover, the data gathered in this research covered a time period from 2016 to 2019.

3.2 Collecting Data in an Online Environment

The advancement of Internet technology in the past few decades has significantly changed the distribution of foreign AV content in China (Chapter 1). As the phenomenon of British TV dramas in China primarily exists online (Chapter 4), conducting research in online settings is crucial for this research. Digital ethnographic methods including online observation, online interaction and online interviews were the primary methods used at the beginning of the research (Hine, 2017). Conducting research on the online environment enabled me to get a deeper understanding of the social experiences that emerge around British TV dramas and provided me with the ability to observe and participate in computer-mediated cultures instead of face-to-face methods (Hine, 2017; 2020). These methods were economical as they saved me the trips to China to conduct face-to-face interviews and offered me the advantage of observing and interviewing non-selective random demographics (Hine, 2017; Pink, 2016).

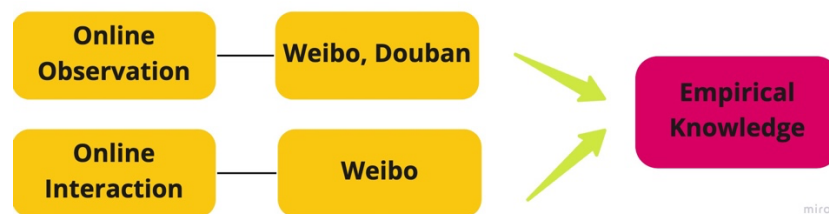


Figure 2: Online observation and online interaction

As the Internet and online interactions have become a crucial part of our lives, the difference between online and offline has become vaguer and blurrier (Carter, 2004). The “everyday life... is increasing technologically mediated... as social interactions increasingly move online” (Murthy, 2008, p.849). To better understand research question (RQ) 1, “What is the reason for the popularity of British TV dramas?” I first immersed myself in “mediated contact with participants rather than in direct presence” (Pink, 2016, p.3). I observed what and how

participants reacted by “digitally tracking them or asking them to invite [me] into their social media practices” (ibid.).

I kept fieldnotes of repeated keywords and themes that represented patterns of readings and reflections on British TV dramas (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Hine, 2017). Several keywords attracted my attention, including “rotten”, “well-made”, and “noble”. These keywords contributed to the pool of the keywords I used to identify British TV drama-related content and contributed to formulating the research questions. During my observations, I found many audiences’ posts were reflexive about the values and social norms they encountered in British TV dramas, which became increasingly political in relation to media policies and censorship that could affect the distribution of foreign AV content in China. Thus, I restructured my research questions and theoretical framework, which initially focused primarily on the online reception of British TV dramas in China.

I conducted online observation and interaction on two field sites for their essential role in forming public opinions in China (Guo, 2018; Hu et al., 2015). The online field sites I selected to collect data were Sina Weibo (Weibo) and Douban.com (Douban). These are both popular social media platforms for British TV drama-related discussions. In the following section, I introduce Weibo and Douban and how I conducted research on both websites.

3.2.1 Online field site no.1: Sina Weibo (Weibo)

I chose Weibo to be the field site of this study as it is the most universal and influential microblogging platform in China. The term “Weibo” (微博) means microblogging in Chinese.

With international platforms Twitter and Facebook blocked in China, Weibo serves as a

combination of these two social media. Weibo combines most of the features of Twitter and Facebook but is not limited to them. Similar to Twitter, users can post short messages of up to 140 characters, repost others' posts, and comment and reply to comments. Users can also post videos, pictures and long articles, share common interests by "liking" a post or leaving a comment, mention other users with "@", start a poll on discussions, participate in discussions with the tag "# #" (with # on both ends of the phrase), and more. Users can also follow, unfollow and block each other and send private messages to private users or public accounts. Weibo also contains third-party applications, such as games, stock reports, podcasts, and cloud storage. Weibo has become the "go-to" place for Chinese netizens to receive news, share information and express their opinions. Public institutions, celebrities and politicians such as the Prime Minister of the UK have official Weibo accounts. Numerous posts and discussions about British TV dramas and culture have been created on Weibo on a regular basis, which has provided me with rich data to study the online phenomenon of British TV dramas in China.

To avoid the ethical concerns of lurking and collecting data online (Murthy, 2008; Robinson & Schulz, 2009), I exposed myself as a Ph.D. fellow and TV/media researcher at Aarhus University in my Weibo biography. My Weibo account has existed since 2010, and I have been an active user ever since. I also used an actual photo of mine as the profile picture to increase the sense of realness of my profile. I have followed viewers of British TV dramas on Weibo. In particular, users who actively engage in British TV drama-related comments and users with profile pictures and biographies related to British TV dramas or celebrities. I observed viewer comments and posts and interacted with the potential interview participants in online discussions regarding British TV dramas and other posts we both found interesting on Weibo. In this way, I hoped to build trust and rapport with viewers in order for them to accept me as a researcher and approach them for further interviews.

Keywords “Sherlock”, “Britain”, “British TV dramas”, and their various related translations – “神探夏洛克”, “神夏”; “Johnlock”; “英剧” (British TV Dramas), “腐国” (Rotten country), “腐剧” (Rotten TV shows), “英剧字幕组” (British TV dramas subtitle group) – among others were used in the search bar to search for relevant posts and users. The observation is an ongoing process from 2016 to 2019. I observed popular comments under British TV dramas and British TV public figures-related threads. The posts and comments that have been selected usually gathered relatively significant amounts of likes, which portrays a sense of shared value and interests.

3.2.2 Online field site no.2: Douban.com (Douban)

Douban.com is a social networking website that was established in 2005. It has been described as a “combination of IMDb, Goodreads, Spotify, Pinterest, Medium, Twitter and Reddit” (Guo, 2018). Users can write blogs, create lists of their recommended music and films, and share these recommendations with their friends. Douban allows users to rate and create content about films, TV, books, music, events and activities. Each film and TV drama has its own page on Douban, where people leave ratings, reviews, and comments. Viewers can choose to “like” review or leave comments on the page. Douban is an important cultural hub where people seek information on films, TV, and cultural things. Douban has a dedicated channel for British TV dramas with the latest recommendations for British TV dramas.

As Douban and Weibo work differently, I used Douban mainly for its user rating function and did not become involved in any online interactions with users. Unlike Weibo, where short tweets are the norm, Douban provides a platform for people to leave long and short reviews,

where more in-depth details and concrete feedback could be included. I observed the ratings pages of several top-rated British TV dramas such as *Sherlock*, *Downton Abbey*, *Skins* and *Fleabag*. The rating page of each season of the TV series gathers a significant number of in-depth reviews and comments that are often connected to users' life contexts and experiences, where people reflect on how specific episodes, plots, or characters are related or distant from their lives. The reviews provide essential knowledge of the readings of British TV dramas from Chinese viewers online. I kept notes on the emerging themes in people's reflections for analysis (Chapter 4).

I kept an archive of the observation data collected on both Weibo and Douban, and I saved and documented them in the form of screenshots. They provided empirical evidence and background knowledge for this study that helped me to further explore public debates on British TV dramas, British culture, media regulations, and censorship. As the interviews I conducted provided more in-depth reflection and clarification on the reception and audience engagement of British TV dramas, that data confirmed the earlier observed data online. The data collected from online observation was used primarily for empirical knowledge that helped with navigating the research. In the next section, I discuss the interviews I conducted both online and offline.

3.3 Interviews

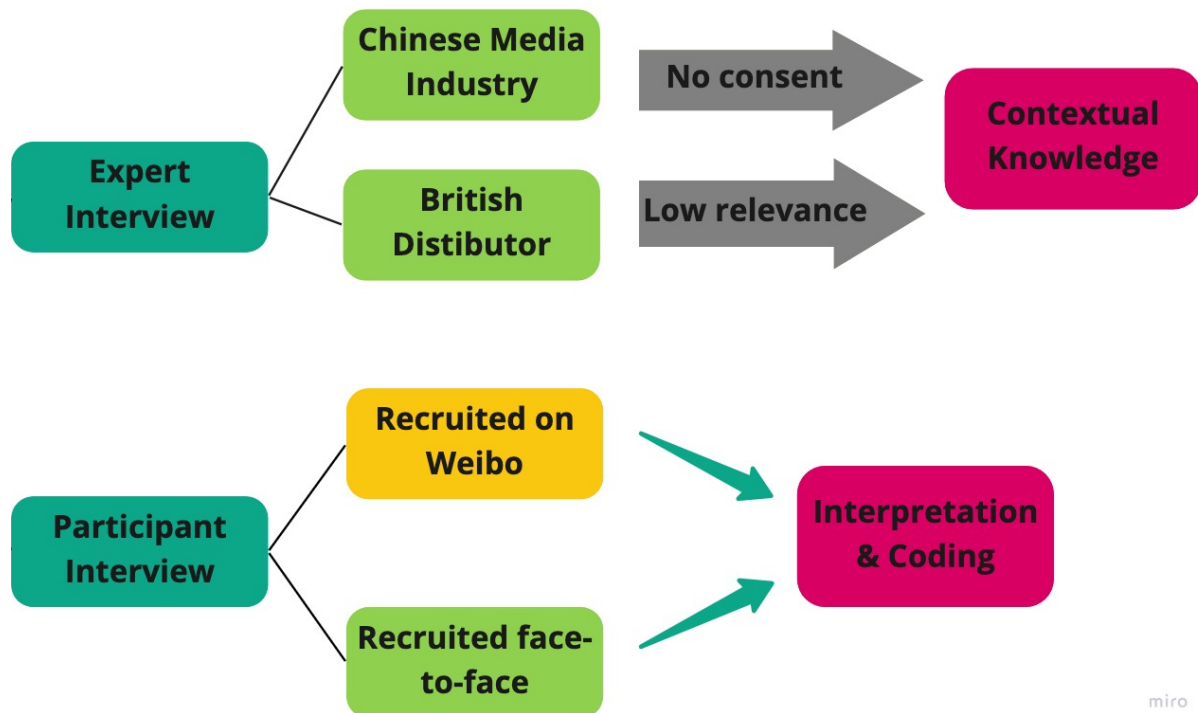


Figure 3: Expert interviews and participant interviews

The interview method was adopted to explore the perceived quality, values, beliefs, and social norms among Chinese audiences consuming British TV dramas and to explore the dynamic between media consumption and audience reception. The semi-structured interviews I conducted were open-ended, ethnographic, and in-depth, which aimed to “understand the complex behaviour of members of society without imposing any a priori categorisation that may limit the field of inquiry” (Fontana and Frey, 2005, p.653). As Converse and Schuman (1974, p.53) argued, “there is no single interview style that fits every occasion or all respondents”. It is essential to be aware of participants’ differences and be prepared to make necessary modifications when unexpected events occur. I consider the interview process to be “active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results (ibid, p.646). I kept returning to the research questions and field notes I have made from

online observations. I made sure to acknowledge the “contextual, societal, and interpersonal elements” of the interviews, as the nature of the social dynamic of the interview can shape the nature of the knowledge generated” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p.647). I listened attentively to my interviewees’ answers, asking them to clarify specific concepts when necessary and asking them additional questions as required. I was always attentive to their attitudes and behaviour and paid particular attention to how they responded when asked about sensitive issues, such as their views on media policies, censorship, and sexuality.

I conducted the research in several phases (Tracy, 2018). As the British TV drama phenomenon exists primarily online, I conducted online interviews in the early stage of this research journey. However, I quickly realised that this research model has a significant limitation: the lack of trust between people, especially when the topic discussed involves ideology, social norms, illegal streaming and media restrictions that are considered sensitive to many Chinese participants engaged in the study. The interviews I conducted were challenging as people were only willing to discuss topics on a relatively superficial level. As more problems emerged while raising sensitive questions in the interviews, I decided to use a multi-model design that includes online and face-to-face interviews (Hine, 2017). Thus, I took a field trip to China to conduct interviews in person. The benefit of semi-structured face-to-face interviews is evident: people are more willing to talk about sensitive topics when they feel the interviewer is “real” and that our conversations could not be traced online.

The in-depth interviews were conducted in three forms: 1) online interviews, including audio and text interviews through instant messaging tools from Weibo, and messaging apps WeChat and QQ; 2) face-to-face interviews – participants were approached both online and offline; 3) WeChat/phone interviews with participants and industry experts. The majority of participant

interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, one was in English. The interview (with Wuqi) was done in English for a couple of reasons. Primarily, the interview was part of a joint research project with Professor Andrea Esser, who also participated in the interview herself. Additionally, the participant himself is comfortable with conducting this interview in English. Written consent was obtained from Professor Esser to incorporate this interview data in this study.

During the interviews, audio calls were recorded with a digital recorder on my phone and later transcribed into text. I conducted the interviews using a prepared guide that included 10 to 15 open questions (Appendix 1). The interviews started with basic questions about the participants, such as family and educational background, the programmes they had been watching recently, which they liked most and why, and their favourite genre of television drama. Later, the interviews moved in a more focused direction. The questions covered a wide range of topics from viewing habits, perceptions of British TV dramas, online activities, opinions about the social norms and values presented in the series, and their thoughts on media regulations, policies and censorship.

The in-depth interviews were conducted with valuable information regarding readings of British TV dramas, and in particular in combination with media regulation and censorship, which is largely overlooked in existing scholarship (Chi & Zhao, 2016; Y.Q.Li, 2020; Zhang, 2017; Zhao, 2016; Zhu, 2014). Furthermore, a high follow-up rate of the interviewees was conducted over one or two years. I made short follow-up conversations with them after the release of several new media policies, as they would potentially affect the accessibility of foreign content in China.

3.3.1 Interviews Recruited in an Online Environment

I used Weibo as a crucial platform to recruit and conduct online interviews. I posted information about recruiting interview participants for British TV dramas on several British TV drama-related discussion boards and on my own Weibo account with hashtags for various trending topics. Potential participants were approached for an interview through the Instant Messenger function of Weibo. In the initial message, I briefly introduced myself as a media researcher, my research project, and how I found them on Weibo. The message ended with a link to my staff webpage on the Aarhus University website to increase trust. Video interviews via Skype were proposed to all participants in the beginning. However, most settled on audio or text interviews. The proposal of video and audio interviews discouraged some people from participating, especially when they considered the interviews to include sensitive topics to discuss with a researcher they had never met.

The interviews conducted by Instant Messengers were conducted during a concentrated period, with an average of 40 to 90 minutes. The lack of real interpersonal communication was addressed using audio calls. The interviews conducted on audio calls reduced the risk of false identity information issues, such as gender and age. Although participants' facial expressions and body language cannot be observed during telephone interviews, these conversations can still capture emotional shifts such as laughter, sarcasm, confusion, and anger. This, to some extent, compensates for the lack of emotional nuance that can be perceived during text interviews (Hine, 2017). It plays an essential role in human interactions and helps to limit the causes of misunderstandings. Despite the difficulties of the time difference between China and Denmark, where I am located, most interviews were conducted in the afternoon or early evening in China. The rest of the interviews were conducted in the form of text. Although it lacks some of the "real human interaction" feelings, the participants' use of emojis and

punctuation such as exclamation marks compensated for some of the emotions lacking from interpersonal interactions. Overall, all the interviews were conducted in a friendly and relaxing atmosphere. I also left time for the participants to ask questions at the end of the interviews.

The rapport I built with participants was evident. Some participants expressed their happiness about being able to engage in such studies, and all participants agreed to have follow-up interviews. Several audience members who participated in the earlier interviews retweeted my posts and promoted the recruitment information on their social media accounts, stating that they had had a lovely experience discussing British TV dramas with me. This attracted some attention online, and several people signed up for interviews as a result. As the participants and I built up trust, some introduced me to join their fan communities. For instance, they invited me to join two chatting groups of fansubbers of British TV drama, where I recruited several people for interviews.

The gender ratio was not a criterion when seeking participants for interviews. My focus, particularly when recruiting online, was on the individual's online activity, their interest in British TV dramas, and their willingness to participate in my research. For participants who only engaged in text-based online interviews, demographic details such as gender, age, and location could only be identifiable from the information they provided on the consent form.

3.3.2 Face-to-face interviews

As the online and offline environments are intertwined and inseparable, conducting research in both online and offline environments provides a deeper and richer understanding of a cultural phenomenon (Tracy, 2018). I conducted 11 face-to-face interviews in Beijing, Shanghai,

Shijiazhuang, and Belgium. Several participants whom I interviewed online agreed to have a second face-to-face interview in Beijing or Shanghai. Through snowballing and online recruitment on Weibo, I recruited several participants in Beijing and Shanghai to participate in the interviews. I chose Shijiazhuang because my parents live there, which was convenient for me when I visited them. Shijiazhuang is the capital city of Hebei province, but a less developed city compared to megacities such as Beijing and Shanghai. I conducted two interviews in Belgium because I was in Brussels for a summer school and met several Chinese audience members who watched British TV dramas.

I tried to create a relaxed atmosphere for my participants. I always asked them if there was any specific place they preferred to meet to conduct the interview – most were conducted in quiet cafés with few people around us. The locations of the cafés were usually close to the city centre, or we would meet in the middle of where we were both located in the city. However, as Beijing and Shanghai are the biggest cities in China, journey to the meeting place took a significantly long time for some participants (over 30 minutes one-way). A few participants asked me whether there would be incentives for participating in the interviews. Considering the long journey to the interview meeting places in Beijing and Shanghai, small incentives such as tins of tea bags were provided to a few participants as motivation. Besides the interviews conducted in the cafés, one was conducted in the participant's home in Shanghai, at her request. Conducting the interview at her flat made her feel more relaxed and showed the trust and rapport built between us were strong enough to let me into her flat for our first meeting.

The face-to-face interviews helped people express their opinions more freely, as they felt the interviewer was real, and our conversations were not easily traced online – they allowed for more facial expressions, body language, and sometimes carefully chosen words. It was

convenient for me to keep field notes and analyse participants' emotions and attitudes toward specific topics. The face-to-face interviews helped me gain a deeper insight into people's perceptions of British TV dramas and existing media policies. However, due to the sensitivities some of the questions might involve, I decided only to use the parts of the interviews where I felt I could maintain my participants' best interests and protection.

3.3.3 Expert interviews

I conducted expert interviews with managers and operators of major video-on-demand (VoD) services in China. I approached them with the help of my close network in China and Europe. The aim of conducting expert interviews was to investigate the following matters: their targeted audiences for British TV dramas; what kinds of British TV dramas they purchase and why; and how censorship and recent regulations affect the foreign films and TVs and viewership on their websites. However, I experienced difficulties approaching professionals from the media industry in China. I was turned down by most and eventually spoke to three people from two major VoD services that have purchased licensed British TV dramas. All wished to have their identification kept confidential. They were not willing to be mentioned or quoted in my papers, nor would they agree to sign a consent form. The assumption here being they considered these actions could lead to them being traced, even with my promises that their identities would be kept anonymous. Most of the responses I encountered were along the lines of, "I can tell you, but you cannot write this". I could not ask anyone to sign a consent form, as it would hinder my chances of conducting further interviews. Ultimately, they agreed to let me use their interviews as background information. The expert interviews with Chinese industry professionals were conducted through phone calls and WeChat messenger in the form of text and audio messages.

After facing significant difficulties in getting insights from Chinese media industry professionals, I decided to use a different approach of including industry professionals in the UK to gain their side of the story. I aimed to understand the exportation of British TV programmes to China and the difficulties they had encountered. In this way, I hope to put the missing parts of the puzzle together to get a better understanding of the distribution of British TV dramas in China. One interview was conducted with Dawn McCarthy-Simpson, the managing director of business development and global strategy at PACT, one of the biggest distributors of British TV dramas in China. The conversation was conducted through a phone call, and verbal consent was given for the audio recording and content used in my thesis. She provided me with information about the types of collaborations they have with Chinese production companies and media industries. Her information further confirmed the existing media policies and contentious trend of the distribution of foreign AV products in China. It inspired me and deepened my understanding of the Chinese television industry and provided valuable background knowledge to frame the research for this thesis. As her interview is less relevant to answering the research questions of this thesis, the interview was not directly used in the analysis but was engaged as empirical evidence that helped to navigate this research.

3.4 Data Processing

The emerging themes and patterns observed from Weibo, Douban and expert interviews helped form this thesis's interview questions and research framework. Of the 28 participant interviews I conducted, 27 were in Chinese, and one was in English. I transcribed all interviews in the language they were conducted in. Due to the overwhelming number of materials collected, I only translated selected quotes that I would use in this thesis into English. The data analysis draws on Sarah Tracy's (2018) primary and secondary cycle coding in an iterative approach.

Coding is the “active process of identifying data as belonging to, or representing, some type of phenomenon” (Tracy, 2018, p.189). The primary cycle coding entails assigning codes to data segments. It is descriptive and focuses on discovering *what* is in the data (ibid.). The secondary cycle involves reviewing previous theories and developing analytical codes tailored to the study’s purpose, question, and previous literature.

I immersed myself in the data collected from the online observation, field notes, and interviews. I then engaged in open coding inductively by identifying emerging themes and patterns in the interview transcripts and categorising them for coding (Charmaz, 2014; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This process aims to stay open to multiple possibilities and allow the data to drive the coding instead of letting the data be interfered with by pre-existing research questions (Tracy, 2018). I developed a codebook that lists all the key codes (a summary example in Appendix 3), definitions, and examples I used in my later analysis (Bernard & Ryan, 2009).

Primary-cycle coding			
Abbreviation	Code	Explanation	Examples
Clash	Criticism	Answer to the question: Is there anything about British drama that you dislike or that find difficult to comprehend?	“It seems that there are storylines about cannabis in British dramas, and I think this is something I’m not quite comfortable with myself.”
Appeals	Transnational appeals	Answer to the question: In your opinion, what is the general attitude towards or understanding of Britain in China?	“I think British TV drama has some role in promoting LGBTQ culture in China. Like the word “rotten country”, basically when everyone talks about Britain, that is, young people, of course, not the older generation, will use the phrase <i>rotten country</i> , which represents gay.”

Table 1: Codebook excerpt

The above examples show the process of how I examine data in primary-cycle coding. The “Clash” code has been categorised into “Criticism”, which is a sub-code under “Meaning-making”. The secondary-cycle codes will be examined in an interactive way with the engagement of previous literature and theories in the secondary coding. In secondary-cycle coding, I critically examined the codes identified in primary-cycle coding, and then organised, synthesised, and categorised them into analytic and interpretive concepts (Tracy, 2018). The secondary-cycle coding required me to interpret the data with theoretical considerations and previous literature in mind to answer the questions of *why* and *how* (Tracy, 2013; 2018). The sub-codes were made into five primary analytical codes: textual appreciation, meaning-making, cosmopolitan imagination, social distinction, and audience response to media policy. The coding names and categories were adjusted several times to fit the re-evaluations of the structure of this thesis.

3.5 My Position as an Academic Researcher

I was born and raised in Shijiazhuang, a provincial capital city, a one-hour train ride from Beijing. I left Shijiazhuang as a teenager and spent most of my adult years in the UK, Shanghai and Denmark. I am a native Mandarin Chinese speaker and learnt English and Russian as my second and third languages. My 33 years of experience have come from many moves around the world, allowing me to adapt to a multitude of cultures. Being a native Chinese has granted me the privilege of understanding my participants' undertones and the boundaries when it comes to sensitive topics, such as state policies and censorship. Dicks and colleagues (2005) have argued that ethnographers' agendas, personal histories and social norms could all contribute to biases in data selection and interpretation. As an academic fan of British TV dramas who understands both cultures of China and Western countries, my view of interpretations and engagements of values and belief systems embedded in British TV dramas, and my understanding of the social context in which my participants were situated have definitely influenced my research approach to an extent. However, I always try to keep my questions and data transparent. I have always returned to study my interview and research questions and adjusted how I conducted interviews based on the experience I gained.

3.6 Ethical Issues and Limitations

Ethics

The consent forms are prepared in online and physical forms for interview participants. A website was created on which research information and consent details were provided. A corresponding link was sent to the recruited participants for them to fill out personal information and give consent to the study. A printed version was provided to people who were present for face-to-face interviews. The information and details on both the online and physical

consent forms explained what this research project seeks to achieve. It also included questions about basic information, such as age, gender, education level, current residence, and overseas experience (work, study, travel). The participants were informed about their rights, such as the right to refuse to answer or stop any questions; their identities would stay confidential and not be made public. The participants' identities are presented in an anonymous form in this thesis, and their real names and account names have been replaced with new made-up names. Part of the interview data was deliberately not used in this study to protect the safety of the participants, as portions of their answers could be seen as politically-sensitive and or radical.

Limitations

There are always limitations in studying a cultural phenomenon (Sacks, 1963; Dumez, 2015). Firstly, there is no universal rule about how many samples are needed in a qualitative study. The limited samples used in this thesis are unlikely to reflect the generalisation of all the audiences who consume British TV dramas in China, nor will they cover all the readings and experiences of audiences who engage with British content. Secondly, ongoing media policy changes and foreign TV-related incidents have imposed difficulties in conducting research. For instance, the arrest of several members of a fan subtitle group and the following shutdown of their fan subtitle group website happened a few months before the completion of this thesis (Chapter 1). Therefore, the previously collected data on participants' ways of consuming British TV dramas could be irrelevant, and participants' attitudes toward state policies could have been affected accordingly. As the interview data was collected prior to the shutdown of the major subtitle groups (YYets) and a few policy-related events, the impact of such action might still be too early to predict. Thus, I have decided to navigate my studies with the already collected interview data until 2019. Thirdly, obtaining a complete list of the available British TV dramas on VoD services was nearly impossible, as they are ephemeral and constantly

changing (Lobato, 2018). Thus, I failed to locate any reliable source of the previously existing British content on each VoD website. I have decided not to include the descriptive statistics based on second-hand data from several unpublished student theses and to instead focus my thesis on the reception studies on British TV dramas.

3.7 Brief Introduction to Interview Participants

The age and education level of the participants of this study mirror previous industry research data (EnfoDesk, 2013). They are young and educated Chinese between the age of 18 to 33. Of the total number of interview participants, 15 were students and 13 were working in various fields. Of the total number of students, two were high school students, 9 were Bachelor's students, and the rest were Master's and PhD students. Seventeen of them had overseas experiences, including travel, work and study. The gender ratio was 21 women to 7 men. Majority of participants are from cities with various sizes, three come from smaller (remote) towns in China.

The participants had very mixed experiences with studying and living abroad. Many participants mentioned that they had limited travel experiences abroad: some had only travelled to nearby Asian countries; a few had lived in Europe and still watched British TV dramas to learn Western cultures and values to better fit into the society in which they lived. Half of the participants had engaged in fan activity, such as translating TV dramas, sharing and distributing relevant information in the fan communities, and writing fanfiction. In other words, they were taste-makers and – at the same time – their own target audience. The other half of the participants consider themselves as casual viewers, as they rarely engage in fan activities, and only watched and know a few popular British shows. Below is the background information

about the interview participants, followed by a complete list of demographics of the participants.

1. Gugu (20, M) is a university student. His favourite genre is crime drama. He also likes period drama and dramas that feature urban life. He started watching *Sherlock* in high school and developed an interest to travel to England. However he considers it only a dream as he is just an ordinary person. He likes to watch British, American and Chinese TV.
2. MC (22, F) watches Chinese, American and British TV dramas. She watches more American TV dramas than British ones. She relies on subtitles to watch British TV dramas and does not know how to use a VPN to get access to foreign information. She is also a fan of “Johnlock” theory.
3. Banbu (24, F) is studying a Master’s degree in the UK. She has just moved there 3 months before I conducted an interview with her. She has set up a Weibo account, “Bakerstreet 233B”, that specializes in sharing *Sherlock*-related news, photos, videos, fan work, etc. Her content has drawn close attention from other *Sherlock* fans. She read the original Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories as a kid and decided to read them again after watching *Sherlock*. She decided to move abroad after watching *Sherlock* and she now lives in Europe.
4. Summer (22, F) is a member of fan subtitle groups. She watches more American TV dramas than British TV dramas. She developed an interest in visiting London after watching British TV dramas. She travelled to Beijing several times for *Sherlock* fan events. She also downloaded *Sherlock* in case one day she could not find it online.
5. Eddie (25, F) likes TV dramas that are relaxing and entertaining, especially American TV dramas, like *Friends* (1994-2004). She has participated in *Sherlock* fan convention in England. She considers herself a fan of the producers of *Sherlock*. She lives in Germany.

6. Chang (25, F) has only seen *Sherlock* and *Black Mirror*, and very rarely participates in fan activities or search for relevant information of British TV dramas. She also likes American TV dramas.
7. Chenai (18, F) lived a year in the US when she was a child and is more aware of Western culture. She has arranged slash-themed events for fans to meet up and binge-watch *Sherlock*. She writes slash fanfiction for Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson. We discussed the topic of her sexuality in the follow-up interview.
8. Xiamu (25, F) is a slash fan of Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson of *Sherlock*. She reads a lot of slash fanfiction. She finds it difficult to use VPNs to bypass the Great Firewall as her English is not very good. So she mostly reads and watches whatever is accessible to her on Chinese streaming services and social media platforms.
9. Xialuo (18, M) has just graduated from high school, and is waiting to start studying in university. He is a fan of the original Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. Xialuo became a fan of Sherlock Holmes at the age of seven; is the admin of one of the *Sherlock* fan groups on QQ (IM chatting program); and is very active in fan communities on various social platforms. He is also very interested in writing fanfiction and developing fan theories, he has so far written up to 30,000 words of fanfiction and 20,000 words of fan theories. He found it very interesting to discuss Sherlock crime theories in the fan communities. He has also sent a handwritten English letter to the producers of *Sherlock* and is currently waiting for a reply.
10. Momo (20, F) works in a fan subtitle group. She has previously translated slash fanfiction to Chinese. She likes to use VPNs to verify news and information about *Sherlock*. She watches British TV dramas primarily through file-sharing on Baidu Cloud.

11. Kim (20, F) is a frequent viewer of British, American and Chinese TV dramas. She has seen several British TV dramas and make constant comparison between British TV and TV programmes from other countries.
12. Jinhe (25, M) is a Master's student, majoring in journalism. He is located in Beijing. I met Jinhe at a summer course in Brussel in 2018. This is the first time he had been abroad. His parents both work at public institutions. Their parenting style is quite relaxed. They are supportive of his free will and respects his choices. Jinhe's favourite TV genre is thriller and sci-fi. He has watched *Sherlock* and *Downton Abbey*.
13. Yiyang (28, F) is a PhD student in Germany. I met her at a summer course in Brussel in 2018. Her dad is a university lecturer, her mum is a teacher. She likes thrillers. She likes *Harlots* (2017-2019), *Sherlock* and *Inside No. 9* (2014).
14. Lubian (25, F) read Sherlock Holmes stories as a kid. She first watched *Sherlock* on Youku.com. Her primary channel for watching foreign films and TVs is fan subtitle websites. She is a fan of "Johnlock" theory. She also translates and imports *Sherlock* related news and information from foreign websites to Chinese platforms. She enjoys participating in foreign fan websites to see what foreign fans are discussing about.
15. Yangtao (30, M) is teaching English in an education institution. He has obtained a Master's degree from England. His parents have given him a lot of freedom growing up.
16. Lan (24, F) is an art executive in a theatre from Beijing. She considers herself to be from a traditional family with strict parenting. Her favourite show is *Sherlock* and she thinks her life choices are heavily influenced by *Sherlock*. She writes slash fan fiction about Sherlock and Dr Watson. Lan watches British TV dramas on DVDs. She likes American and British films and TV and very rarely watches Chinese TV. Lan has travelled to Britain before.

17. Wen Shi (26, F) is a PhD student in literature studies. She is from a city in the northeast of China, and currently resides in Sichuan. Her mother is an English teacher, with an open attitude to Western culture. Her dad is a public servant. She watches TV from Japan, Korea, America and Britain. Although her English is good, she still finds it hard to understand British accents. So she has to rely on subtitles. She has previously been to America for two months for a summer course. I met Wen Shi in Belgium at a summer course we both enrolled in.
18. Vivian (22, F) is from northeast China. She just obtained a Bachelor's degree in London, and had enrolled in a Master's programme that was yet to begin. She finds British TV dramas too depressing, and she only watches them to learn English. She watches American and British dramas on Chinese-made pirate websites. She considers herself from an open and liberal-minded family.
19. Rai (26, F) is from a remote area in Xinjiang, China. She moved to Beijing after graduating with a Master's degree from the UK. Her parents are both public servants, open-minded and pay close attention to her education. They encouraged her to get out of Xinjiang and see more of the world. Rai watches both American and British TV dramas. She likes to watch them for English practice, and she relies on subtitles to get a better understanding of the TV content and cultural references.
20. Shan Gao (30, F) lives in Shijiazhuang. She is a university lecturer teaching medical students English. She has obtained a Master's degree from the UK. She is one of three kids in her family. She considers her parents to be quite relaxed and open-minded. She watches mostly American and British TV programmes and very rarely Chinese dramas. She uses American and British TV dramas to practice her English.
21. Qing (28, F) is teaching English in a university in Shanghai. She worked in Korea before teaching Chinese. She has obtained a Master's degree in the UK. She likes British,

- Japanese and Korean TV dramas. Her parents are blue-collar workers, and their parenting style is quite relaxed. She watches British TV dramas mostly through file-sharing or on Bilibili.com, a video sharing website. She likes to watch TV series that are not mainstream.
22. Xiaotong (30, F) is from Shijiazhuang, China. Ma obtained a Master's degree from China. She currently lives in Shanghai. Her parents are blue-collar workers and she considers their parenting style to be quite relaxed. She likes to watch Korean, Chinese, American, and British TV dramas. She likes British accents and specifically watches British TV dramas to "correct" her accent.
 23. Linyu (27, M) is from a small town in Chongqing, China. He now works in Shanghai. His dad is a middle school teacher; his mum is a housewife. He grew up in a restrictive environment: his father would physically punish him when he was a child. Growing up in a small town he had little access to foreign information, and he was not exposed to British and American drama until he was at university. His favourite genre is heritage drama and comedy.
 24. Wenting (33, F) is a freelance editor. Her parents are blue-collar workers and are not very educated. They were quite relaxed in their parenting style. Wenting likes British TV dramas, especially about British countryside and heritage dramas. She does not watch American TV. She finds British TV dramas to be sophisticated and edgy. She does not have the desire to travel to the UK after watching British TV dramas.
 25. Jia (25, F) is from Anhui province, China. She obtained a Bachelor's degree from the UK and is currently doing an internship in the European Parliament. We conducted the interview over the phone while she was visiting Shanghai. Both of her parents run their own businesses. Her dad is very traditional and strict; her mum is open-minded and respects her free will. She watches American, British and Korean TV dramas, mostly on Netflix and subtitle group websites.

26. Wuqi (29, M) did the entire interview in English. He is from a small town in the south of China and has lived in Shanghai for 11 years. He works in a sports marketing company. His parents are public servants, and they raised Wuqi in a free and liberal way. Wuqi is openly gay and he talked about his sexuality in the interview. Wuqi is very knowledgeable about British and American TV series. He also likes to watch British and American reality TV shows.
27. Jiexi (22, F) is from Beijing. She is a university graduate who is preparing to apply for a Master's. She majored in German and is hoping to teach Chinese abroad in the future. She has been abroad and has plans to go abroad again. She works in a fan subtitle group, in charges of German translation. Both of her parents are civil servants. Her parents are open-minded and easy to communicate with.
28. Beixi (21, M) grows up in a traditional family. His parents are very not strict with him. Beixi has worked in several fan subtitle groups and is very knowledgeable about fansubbing works. He is a fan of *Doctor Who* (1963-).

Demographic information of the participants is listed in the table below.

	User ID	Age	Gender	Highest Education	Occupation	Oversea experience
1	Gugu	20	M	Bachelor's	Student	No
2	MC	22	F	Bachelor's	Accountant	No
3	Banbu	24	F	Master's	Student	Yes
4	Summer	22	F	Bachelor's	Student	No
5	Eddie	25	F	Master's	Student	Yes
6	Chang	25	F	Bachelor's	Accountant	No
7	Chenai	18	F	High School	Students	Living
8	Xiamu	25	F	Bachelor's	Banker	No
9	Xialuo	18	M	High School	Student	No
10	Momo	20	F	Bachelor's	Student	No
11	Kim	20	F	Bachelor's	Student	No
12	Jinhe	25	M	Bachelor's	Student	Travel
13	Yiyang	28	F	Master's	PhD Student	Living and Traveling
14	Lubian	25	F	Bachelor's	N/A	Yes
15	Yangtao	30	M	Master's	English Teacher	Living and Traveling
16	Lan	24	F	Bachelor's	Art Management	Travel
17	Wen Shi	26	F	Master's	PhD Student	Living and Traveling
18	Vivian	22	F	Bachelor's	Student	Living and Traveling
19	Rai	26	F	Master's	Advertising	Living and Traveling
20	Shan Gao	30	F	Master's	English Teacher	Living and Traveling
21	Qing	28	F	Master's	English Teacher	Living and Traveling
22	Xiaotong	30	F	Master's	Sales	No
23	Linyu	27	M	Master's	Research Assistance	No
24	Wenting	33	F	Bachelor's	Freelance Editor	Travel
25	Jia	25	F	Bachelor's	Student	Living and Traveling
26	Wuqi	30	M	Bachelor's	Sports Marketing	Travel
27	Jiexi	20	F	Bachelor's	Student	Traveling
28	Beixi	20	M	Bachelor's	Student	No

Table 2: Demographic information of the participants

Chapter 4: The Rising of British TV Dramas in China

As outlined in the methodology, the aim of this chapter is to provide a descriptive analysis of the rising of British TV dramas in China, serving as the central case study of this thesis. This includes an examination of the varied promotional strategies utilised in media, streaming platforms, and television channels. A summary of four British TV dramas is included, which are *Sherlock* (2010-2017), *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015), *Fleabag* (2016-2019), and *Skins* (2007-2013). The rationale behind choosing these particular dramas is threefold. Firstly, the participants made constant reference to them during the interviews. Thus, a brief description of the plots and characters can provide empirical information to better engage with the data analysis in the following two chapters. Secondly, these dramas represent diverse television genres, potentially offering more comprehensive insights into the various appeals, values, and readings associated with British TV drama to a greater extent. Thirdly, these dramas are highly rated by Chinese viewers online (Y.Q.Li, 2020). They address three distinct interpretations of British TV drama in China: queer readings, the image of “nobility” and “sophistication”, and relevance to societal issues. Finally, several other British TV series and programmes such as *Inside No.9* were also referred to by participants during the interviews. However, they are not explicitly illustrated in this chapter, as the majority of participants had primarily watched and discussed the above four dramas in-depth.

It is important to note that the media policies and restrictions imposed on foreign AV content (Chapter 1) have similarly affected the distribution of British TV in China. For example, the restrictive regulations on online foreign AV content released in 2014 have made synchronised broadcasting impossible for British TV dramas on VoD websites. Therefore, the brief window previously opened for more diverse foreign programmes to be imported into China has benefitted the distribution and popularity of British TV dramas in China. As a result, it is

reasonable to assume that fan subtitle groups/websites remain one of the only stable forces in distributing British TV dramas to a broader audience in China. Furthermore, as the primary foci of this thesis are the reception and audience engagement of British TV dramas in China, an in-depth presentation of the means of distribution of British TV dramas in China is not included in this chapter.

4.1 Introduction of British TV Dramas in China

I think the way you appeal to other cultures is to be your own culture, just to be yourself. Americans like British shows; they want them to be British... The shows are British because they are made by British people. It's just natural, isn't it.

Showrunner of *Sherlock*, Steven Moffat (as cited in Hills et al., 2019, p.117)

Although British TV programmes have long existed in China, they were virtually unknown until 2010. During the 1980s to 1990s, China imported a very limited volume of British TV programmes, including classic masterworks and comedy programmes (Zhu, 2014). Heritage films and dramas inspired by classic literature such as *Oliver Twist*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre* have been made available through multiple TV channels, VCDs and DVDs. These programmes were mainly dubbed in Mandarin Chinese with Chinese subtitles. Despite the circulation of British AV products in China then, British content was never considered a “label” that is widely consumed by Chinese audiences. By the time of 2010-2011, British TV dramas started to gain popularity in China with popular dramas such as *Sherlock*, *Downton Abbey*, and *Black Mirror*. They were first introduced to China by fan subtitle groups and soon gained a massive following from Chinese audiences online (Y.Q.Li, 2020).

Sherlock played an important leading role in introducing British TV dramas to Chinese audiences in 2010. With an average of 140,000,000 viewers for the third and fourth seasons on

its primary streaming platform Youku (accessed in 2018), *Sherlock* has become one of the most-viewed British TV dramas in China. The production team of *Sherlock* acknowledges the mass following from their Chinese audiences, that they included special surprises for its Chinese-speaking fans in the new Christmas episode included (Joseph & Cockroft, 2015). The *Sherlock* Scriptwriter, Steven Moffat, told the Radio Times that the new *Sherlock* Christmas episode had included clues in Chinese for its Asian viewers, “There are loads of references. One of them you have to be able to speak Chinese to get” (Joseph & Cockroft, 2015). Besides this, the affirmation from both governments further demonstrates the willingness of China and Britain to further their collaboration in cultural exchanges: during a state visit to the UK in 2015, Chinese president Xi Jinping cited in his speech the huge popularity of William Shakespeare, *Sherlock*, James Bond and *Downton Abbey* in China, illustrating how China and UK can cooperate together with different cultural backgrounds (Wu, 2015); former UK Prime Minister David Cameron’s Sina Weibo account was filled with thousands of requests to speed up the release of the new series of *Sherlock* (Appendix 2). The fan pressure led him to comment on this in one of his interviews during his visit to China. “I know that Benedict is hugely popular in China; he is a big star. But sadly, I can’t tell them what to do, as it’s an independent company. I will do everything I can to say that people in China want more Sherlock Holmes and more of the modern version” (BBC News China blog, 2014; Youku, 2013).

The chief executive of PACT, John McVay, considers the popularity of British TV dramas as the beginning of a durable partnership between China and the UK: “This is planting the seeds of a long-term relationship with the UK, and we are determined to pursue that because I don’t see why the Americans should be allowed to just clean up” (Burrell, 2014). This indicates that American cultural products have established a profound influence in the Chinese market, which British distributors are eager to challenge.

Prior to the popularity of British TV dramas, American TV dramas were already well-known in China prior to the popularity of British TV dramas (Xu, 2018). In 2005, *Prison Break* (2005-2017), *Friends* (1994-2004) and *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) were regularly featured in news headlines in China (Gao, 2016; Gao, 2019; Xu, 2018; Zhang, 2017). Additionally, VoD Channels dedicated to American TV dramas were established, such as Youku, SOHU and TenCent were established as early as 2009. However, this landscape began to change in 2010. British TV dramas contributed to the pool of English-speaking content in China, which was previously dominated by American TV dramas. Since 2012, major Video on Demand (VoD) websites Youku, TenCent and SOHU TV launched channels dedicated to streaming British television dramas and boosting their popularity to a new high (NetEase, 2013). The VoD websites competed to bring the latest and most well-known British TV dramas to their platforms. SOHU TV was the first to establish a dedicated channel for British TV programmes in August 2012. The SOHU TV's British channel *BBC Yinglunwang*, which roughly translates to "British London website", works as an educational hub for everything British-related, from television dramas, information about British culture, and English learning and study programmes in the UK. To compete with SOHU TV, TenCent launched its own British TV drama channel in June 2013. TenCent struck collaboration deals with BBC Worldwide, ITV Studios, Fremantle Media, All3Media International, and Endemol to screen 13 series, with over 500 episodes of British television dramas, including *Doctor Who*, *Black Mirror*, *Sherlock*, *The IT Crowd* (2006-2013) and more (NetEase, 2013). Youku signed a license to 32 shows and 200 episodes, with exclusive rights in China to stream nine new titles, including hit shows such as *Sherlock*, *Downton Abbey*, and *Black Mirror* (ibid.).

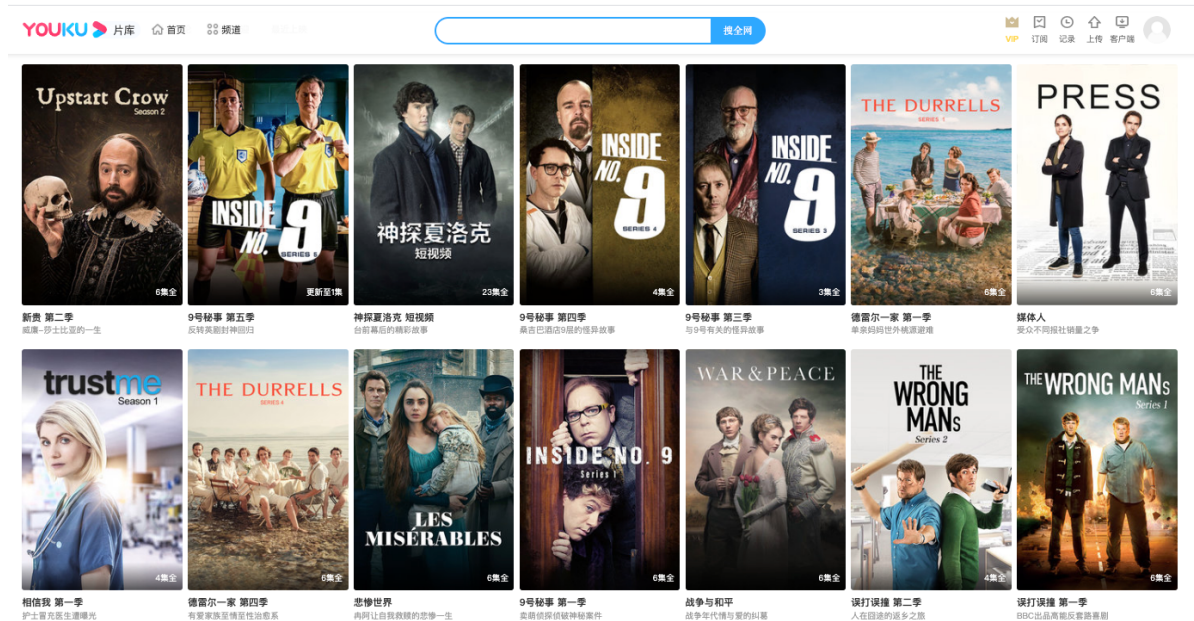


Figure 4: Youku British TV channel

This influx introduced a different cultural experience to Chinese audiences. Paul Dempsey, president of global markets at BBC Worldwide, has also commented on the success of exporting UK content to Asia, particularly to China as the largest market, “Buyers are realising that UK content can really provide an alternative to US fare as audiences recognise the quality of British dramas for their high production values, unique British culture and humour, as well as the creative ideas” (BBC, 2014).

With the popularity of British TV dramas in China, Britain has become a popular destination for wedding photoshoots, with castles and bucolic fields being some of the top choices (Parry, 2016). Couples who are unwilling to travel overseas have other popular alternatives to get their pre-wedding photos taken, such as Thames Town in Shanghai. This is a neighbourhood that resembles a real British-themed town filled with wealthy and upper-class Chinese (Strochlic, 2017). “There is a huge appetite for British culture, particularly among young, fashionable Chinese,” said Briony Hanson, director of film for the British Council to *The Express* UK (Buckland, 2013). It is reasonable to assume that the consumption of British culture is seen as

a status symbol of wealth and success in China, where the fast-growing middle classes are looking for symbolic badges for their economic strength and social status. Anything from watching British TV dramas to sending children to British schools is seen as a social symbol (Buckland, 2013).

The praising of British TV dramas for their “class” and “taste” that only a dedicated group can enjoy is heard frequently in British TV drama news coverage in China (NetEase, 2013; China Daily, 2017). Media reports portray an exquisite image of Britain as being noble and sophisticated to the mass audiences – Appadurai (1990) refers to the “mediascape”, where media and technology facilitate an “imagined world” (Anderson, 2006). For instance, a series of heated discussions spread over the Internet after the term “chain of disdain” first appeared in the Nanfang city newspaper in 2013 (Tencent, 2013; China Daily, 2017). It refers to a linear chain of hierarchy and stereotypes of a particular class or taste related to cultural products and consumption. Audiences of British TV dramas were listed at the top of the social hierarchy, considered to be more “superior” than audiences of American TV dramas, who in turn, look down on audiences of Japanese/Korean TV dramas (Tencent, 2013; China Daily, 2017). This discussion has raised the question of whether there is a bias against the tastes of television viewers or a perception of the quality of television from different countries. Furthermore, it seems that the “high-end” impression of British TV drama viewers is supported by existing research data. According to several industry surveys, Chinese audiences of British TV dramas are highly educated and from high-income households (Entgroup Report as cited in NetEase, 2013). A study from analysis firm Yiguanguoji (ibid.) shows that the audience of British TV dramas is mainly concentrated between high-income white-collar workers (714-1,428 USD monthly⁸) and low-income students (143 USD monthly) between the ages of 21 and 35. The

⁸ According to the data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the average monthly salary per capita in China in 2019 was 365.77 USD.

gender ratio is relatively balanced at 51:49 male to female. A report from entertainment firm Entgroup (NetEase, 2013) found that 97% of audiences of British TV dramas at least possess a university degree. Considering less than 4% of the whole population in China has a Bachelor degree (Yan, 2022), the audiences of British TV dramas are at the top of the cultural ladder (Staff, 2013). They are also the best educated among audiences of other TV dramas in China. Entgroup (NetEase, 2013) examined social media sites that draw an exclusive white-collar and university-educated user base: discussion of British TV dramas hit 13% while Korean dramas only accounted for 1%. The result shows that British TV dramas have a much higher discussion rate among university-educated Chinese than Korean TV dramas – almost 13 times as much. Thus, the industry data about audiences of British TV dramas seems to be consistent with the perceived high-end, aristocratic and exquisite images of British TV dramas. The spokeswoman for Youku, Jean Shao, expressed similar sentiments about audiences of British TV dramas to the *Wall Street Journal* (2013): “Though British drama viewers are a minority, they are high-end and very loyal... This is what the advertisers fancy.” Based on the industry data and interviews with major VoD services, it has become clear that the “disdain chain” ranking reflects social reality to a certain degree, despite being highly subjective. Thus, it raises the question of whether the taste hierarchy of British TV dramas is seen as a means of social distinction. More analysis regarding this question is examined in Chapters 6.

In an effort to promote this “British quality” to Chinese audiences, media platforms frequently highlight cultural stereotypes and clichés as a strategy to illustrate the cultural differences between Britain and China to provide “reassurance and familiarity” to Chinese audiences (Gilardi et al., 2018). Such cultural stereotypes are usually not intended to be used negatively and are considered one of the most common strategies to promote international audio-visual content in China (Gilardi et al., 2018). For instance, SOHU Entertainment (2011) published an

article, “Analysis of the best British TV drama in 21st Century *Downton Abbey*”, which was taken verbatim from Nanfang City News. To emphasise how sophisticated and well-made the series is, the article says:

Even the prince and princess are watching it... It satisfies all your imaginations about Britain in old times. Some impoverished aristocrats marry the daughters of rich people; British butlers who are full of temperament; and poor servants who desperately want to climb into the upper class. It talks about wars, adultery and homosexuality.

The news coverage consistently highlighted the exquisiteness of the series and its popularity with the British aristocracy to promote the connection between TV consumption, class society, British heritage, and topics such as sexual freedom.

In another attempt to provide a localised imagination to bridge the cultural differences gap and make British TV dramas more familiar and relatable to Chinese audiences, Youku (2013b) described *Downton Abbey* as the *Dream of the Red Chamber* of Britain in one of its Weibo posts in 2013. *Dream of the Red Chamber* is one of the Four Great Classical Novels in China from the mid-18th century, and is well known in China. However, this strategy did not seem to receive a positive response from audiences. Many criticised Youku for using a bad comparison to *Downton Abbey* with audiences commenting these two works are “nothing alike”.

Overall, it can be seen that British TV dramas have drawn significant attention among Chinese viewers online since 2010. Online commentators and industry insiders suggest that this popularity stems from the high production values of British TV dramas, appealing to well-educated and affluent Chinese viewers. Whether this is indeed the case with the demographics and the perception of British TV dramas, or perhaps there are other underlying reasons, remains

an intriguing question. Therefore, to better understand these aspects, the following section will provide a summary of four popular British TV dramas. This summary will assist in interpreting the interview data discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, enhancing our understanding of this cultural phenomenon.

4.2 Summary of frequently mentioned British TV Dramas

Before going into further exploration of the phenomenon of British TV dramas in China, it is important to provide a summary of a few frequently mentioned dramas from interview data, such as *Sherlock*, *Downton Abbey*, *Fleabag*, and *Skins*. *Sherlock* is an iconic British crime drama that started a new wave of British TV dramas in the Chinese market in 2010 (ibid.). Besides the innovations of the modern adaptation of the original literature and the high-quality production, what is more significant is that the queer readings of *Sherlock* have the potential to shape the perceived national image of Britain among young people in China. On the other hand, *Downton Abbey* has attracted a considerable following in China by presenting British culture and the historical development of British society. It has gained wide attention among online Chinese audiences through its perceived British identity, aesthetics, and exquisiteness (Miller, 2014; People, 2014). *Fleabag* and *Skins* provided another side of modern Britain in which the societal topics they addressed are constantly mentioned among participants. The purpose of this summary is to give a review of background knowledge of the content of the TV dramas, which helps to understand interview data and analysis in Chapters 5 and 6. A more detailed example of the queer readings of British TV dramas is followed in section 4.3.

The *Sherlock* Craze in China

Sherlock (神探夏洛克) is a BBC crime television drama based on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective stories featuring Sherlock Holmes (originally published 1887-1927). Since its first broadcast on BBC1 in 2010, the show has traveled across borders and continents and has received substantial global success. The first season of *Sherlock* has reached a high rating of 9.4 (out of 10) on Douban.com, an equivalent to IMDb, with more than 410,000 people participating in the rating (accessed in September 2021). As Pearson suggests, *Sherlock* is an “intertextual mash-up part Conan Doyle, part *Doctor Who*, part British heritage television and more” (2019, p.4). The series' visual aesthetics bring the stories from the Victorian fog to modern London, from horse-drawn carriages and dark alleys to Black London cabs, traffic jams, SOHO, Chinatown and advanced medical labs. The contemporary setting change is coupled with its use of futuristic science and technology while maintaining Conan Doyle's original sense of adventure and mystery. Dr. Watson (played by Martin Freeman) is portrayed as a war veteran struggling with PTSD and adjusting to his boring life back in London. When he is introduced to Sherlock Holmes (played by Benedict Cumberbatch), a “psychopath”-like detective who gets overly excited about solving crimes, they immediately decided to work and live together. The duo shares a flat in central London on B221, Baker Street, that is decorated with antiques, old-fashioned furniture, and dark patterned wallpaper, which shows a sharp contrast to the modern smartphones and laptops lying around the flat. Their work benefits from the help of contemporary technology: smartphones, computers, GPS and Google maps. Holmes and Watson also run blogs to interact with their followers and clients. These blogs can also be accessed in real life, which allows their worldwide audiences to interact online.

Different from other British TV dramas, Sherlock Holmes was well-known in China prior to the release of the BBC dramas. The literature was first introduced to China in the 19th century

and soon became one of the bestsellers in China. As a result, the stories of Sherlock Holmes, along with other Western detective fictions translated into Chinese, introduced new narrative techniques and new ways of thinking into China and inspired some early Chinese detective literature (Zhang, 2005). They alerted the Chinese public to the outside world and educated mass readers about British justice, legal, and value systems. Furthermore, Chinese cinema has also repeatedly introduced movies based on the stories of Sherlock Holmes, for instance, *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), fostering a strong familiarity with Sherlock Holmes before the release of BBC *Sherlock* in 2010.

History and Heritage: *Downton Abbey*

The UK has a long history of exporting heritage dramas worldwide, with the recent award-winning *Downton Abbey* a prime example (Redvall, 2019). *Downton Abbey*, created and written by Julian Fellowes, is an ITV heritage drama set in the 1910s to 1920s. The series was sold in over 200 countries worldwide and won multiple awards, including 15 Emmys (emmys.com) and 3 Golden Globes (goldenglobes.com). Steeped in a rich historical, literary, and cultural background, British historical and heritage dramas are often appreciated by Chinese audiences as profound and sophisticated works. *Downton Abbey*'s first season enjoys 9.3 scores on Douban with over 160,000 reviews. The high production values, high resonance to historical settings and exquisite costumes are among some of the most popular reviews. Notably, the former PM David Cameron gifted a script of *Downton Abbey*'s first episode with his own autograph to the premier of China Li Keqiang during his state visit to the UK (Miller, 2014). The managing director of Carnival Films, Gareth Neame, who came up with the initial idea for the series, told *The New York Times* that *Downton Abbey* has received overwhelming success in China, "This is the People's Republic of China, and this is a show all

about primogeniture and inheritance and aristocracy and all those things that you thought the whole point of China was to do away with. So that was a surprise” (Egner, 2013).

Unlike most other British TV dramas, *Downton Abbey* was shown on both national television channels and streaming services. The first and second seasons of *Downton Abbey* were broadcast on CCTV-8, and two episodes were released each day at 10:30 PM from 23rd April 2013. All the content was dubbed in Mandarin Chinese, and according to CCTV’s editor, “we promise there is no cutting of the content” (Xu, 2013). However, *Downton Abbey* had to fit in the 40-minute TV episode format for public television channels, so the episode was cut from over an hour to 40 minutes in length. The rest was added to the beginning of the following episode.

Downton Abbey embeds its storylines within historical events, such as the sinking of the Titanic, the Spanish influenza pandemic and the First World War. Like the period drama *Upstairs Downstairs* (1971-1975 & 2010-2012), *Downton Abbey* and other heritage films and television often focus on “a crisis of inheritance among the privileged classes, or the threat of disinheritance” (Higson, 2003, p.28). *Downton Abbey* evolved its stories around servants, employers, and the Crawley family living in the house. The story starts with the tragic incident of the Titanic in 1912, in which the heir of Downton Abbey dies. As the Earl of Grantham, Robert and his wife Cora have three daughters and no sons; they have no close male relative who could inherit Downton Abbey. The next male heir is a distant cousin, a middle-class lawyer named Matthew Crawley. The Abbey must be inherited by a male according to the will of the Earl of Grantham’s father. Lord Grantham’s mother, as the senior party of the family, adopts modern ideas and rebels against such restrictions that prevent women from inheriting

their family properties. The characters in *Downton Abbey* find themselves caught up in a rapidly changing world in the 20th century where old traditions and modernity clash.

Modern Comedy – *Fleabag*

Fleabag is a dark comedy-drama written by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who also starred as the protagonist in the series. *Fleabag* was translated into 伦敦生活 in China, which means Life in London. It has been rated as one of the best-ranking British TV series in China, with a high score of 9.5 for the second season (rated by over 137,986 people) and 8.8 (rated by over 157,276 people) for the first season on Douban by the time of August 2021. *Fleabag* has quickly captured a large number of Chinese audiences with its innovative narrative: constantly breaking the fourth wall, where the character is speaking directly to the audience with glances into the camera; openly talking about female pleasures, sex, orgasm, cheating, grieving, family issues and mental health which still remain taboo in Chinese society.

The unnamed protagonist was addressed as “Fleabag” in the series, who seems to be very liberal about sex. She is often indulging in alcohol and drugs, also emotionally manipulating her ex-boyfriend. Fleabag showed us a broken, inappropriate, rude, and very unlikeable twenty-thirty-something millennial living in London, who ran a failing guinea pig café with her best friend Boo and tried to navigate her life. She was affected by the trauma of her mum passing away from breast cancer and losing Boo via suicide. This trauma was a recurring theme within the show which often showed flashbacks in every episode. She had been grieving the loss of these two important people in her life while rejecting anyone who tries to help her and used sex as her coping mechanism to bury her sorrow. She lies, she cheats, and she doesn’t even like herself. “She is everything we as millennial women are told not to be” (Penhaligon, 2019), yet this anti-heroine character is so real and relatable on so many levels. Many plots in *Fleabag*

talked about it is OK to be imperfect, and that we should accept our imperfections and make peace with them.

Teen drama - *Skins*

Skins (2007-2013), is a critically acclaimed British TV drama about the lives of a group of teenagers from Bristol, England. It first premiered in 2007 and won multiple awards including the Philips Audience Award at the BAFTAs 2009. *Skins* first season enjoys a high rating of 8.7 on Douban, with 68024 views (accessed in 2020). Due to the popularity of the show, an American remake (2011) has been created and has lasted one season. *Skins* replaces its cast every two seasons. It focuses on a wide range of sociocultural issues and challenges from mental illness, dysfunctional families, sexuality, identity politics, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and bullying. It explores the lives, struggles, and relationships between these teenagers. The first season of *Skins* was praised as “British drama at its very best, featuring real teenage characters with real teenage character flaws” (Pelley, 2019). The Guardian commented, “Its removed some of the stigma around mental health issues, its never been patronising or moralistic around drink and drugs, it helped kick some of the stigma around sexuality and a remake of the show led to America being absolutely freaking horrified” (Bryan 2012). Despite its dark and heavy themes throughout the series, it also engages with dark comedy, joy, freedom, and the lively sense of being young and having precious friendships.

The subject matter in *Skins* is just as impactful for Chinese viewers. A Douban user 4Ming (547 likes, 2008) commented, “Almost all of my friends who watch *Skins* for the first time tell me that the show offers them a very different perspective of the UK. The show is filled with foul language, cigarettes, marijuana, alcohol, and the exposed bodies of young men and women. But the beauty of *Skins* is that it seems like all this life is irrelevant to you, yet it always reaches

out to a corner of your heart.” *Skins* offers an aspect of British life that is different from what is commonly expected for its Chinese viewers. Its narratives are both challenging and moving, providing viewers with a sense of the complexity of growing up in the UK and the modern world in general. This raw and controversial content is uncommon to be featured in Chinese TV dramas (Chapter 1).

The above summary of the frequently mentioned TV dramas covered a range of genres from crime, heritage, comedy to teen dramas. These dramas have drawn significant attention and received high ratings both globally and in China. As they each tell distinct stories covering various issues of life and society, examining them benefits the understanding of the reception of British TV dramas. In the following section, I specifically analysis the queer readings of British TV dramas in China, as it is a cultural phenomenon that influences the perception of British content and British culture.

4.3 Slash fans and the Rotten Country

Chinese Women Can't Stop Reading and Writing Gay "Sherlock" Fan Fiction.

- Abad-Santos, The Atlantic, 2014

Besides the “high-end”, “classy” image British TV dramas are associated with, the widespread attention to LGBTQ themes and gender roles has given Britain a new national image in China, which is *Fu Guo* (腐国), that can roughly translate to “Rotten Country” or “Gay Country”. The word *Fu* was predominantly used to describe queer readings in popular culture. In China, most slash fans of Sherlock and Watson’s relationship are women (Abad-Santos, 2014; Han, 2014; Hampton, 2015). They are jokingly referred to and self-claimed as *Fu Nv* (腐女), which means *rotten women* in Chinese. The term *Fu Nv* is originally from the word *Fujoshi*, which means

“rotten girl” in Japanese. This term has been popularised in Japan to describe female fans of manga, novels and TV who enjoy fantasizing about a romantic relationship between male characters.

The discussions about queer readings of British TV dramas ignited a storm among young Chinese audiences (Staff, 2014). Particularly, the slash fiction about *Sherlock* created by Chinese fans online make it the most significant and prolific phenomenon related to British TV dramas in China (Abad-Santos, 2014; Han, 2014; Hampton, 2015). The slash theory that describes the romantic relationship between Sherlock and Watson is called *Fuhua* 福华 (Sherlock and Watson) in Chinese. The Fuhua Baidu⁹ online forum, where fans share and read gay fan fiction of Sherlock and Watson, has attracted more than 118,000 followers (accessed in 2017). The forum has more than 1.1 million discussions focused on fanfic, in particular slash fiction featuring the Fuhua relationship. Slash fiction is a sub-category of fan fiction that portrays homosexual relationships that were not specified in the original script (Allington, 2007). Chinese slash fans enjoy looking for any clue or subtext of a homosexual relationship between male characters. Any touching, eye contact, or even fighting could be interpreted as *Mai Fu* (卖腐), which can be directly translated as “selling the idea of *rotteness* or *homosexuality*”. Here *Mai Fu* is not simply a strategy to attract queer-sensitive audiences at the expense of the real LGBTQ community in China, but rather a coping mechanism for the censorship of queer content and the public’s demand for a more open and diverse cultural environment (Li, 2009).

⁹ Baidu.com is the biggest online search engine in China.

The queer readings of British TV dramas have been seen to be brewing for some years but only exploded into an overnight sensation since *Sherlock* became popular among fans online. British TV dramas such as *Merlin* (2008-2012) and *Torchwood* (2006-2011), which were released a few years earlier than *Sherlock*, also attracted discussions around their queerness and an extensive slash fan base in China. *Merlin*, *Sherlock*, *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood* were jokingly called the four classic “gay shows” of the BBC on social media. However, *Sherlock* was the catalyst of queer readings of British TV dramas in China. It has opened possibilities for public debates on LGBTQ culture and gender roles in general, which has long lacked discussions in Chinese society (Chapter 1). Looking at the reviews on *Sherlock*'s Douban page, the majority of the most liked reviews were reflections on the queer readings of British TV dramas. Douban user Chen compared the LGBTQ elements in British TV dramas with Japanese TV:

The reason Britain is called a rotten country is that British TV dramas are screaming “homosexuality” with their burning soul and life. Japanese TV dramas have only learned the surface, not the core values. (Chen, 2012; 3,021 likes)

Chen considers British TV dramas to be full of queer elements, while other countries only touch upon it on a superficial level. It is fair to say that Chen refers to queer as the hallmark of British TV dramas. Yuba (2012; 2,303 likes) expressed similar opinions by praising *Sherlock* for providing cultural materials for people to identify with. In particular, it attracts a wide range of audiences, including women, gay men, and people from all walks of life.

The love of the Fu Nv [rotten girls], the gospel of the gays, the guidebook for people into young men, the soul garden for the geeks. Let me leave a five-star review first.

Although a significant number of online reviews on Douban demonstrate the wide popularity of queering readings of *Sherlock*, criticism towards the queer elements in *Sherlock* also exists. *Sherlock* has been accused of queerbaiting with its multiple “gay scenes” between Sherlock

and Watson throughout the four series (Fathallah, 2014; Anselmo, 2018). The writer and showrunner of *Sherlock*, Steven Moffat has denied that queer-baiting strategies were used in the series on several occasions. During an interview with *The Guardian*, he said, “There’s no indication in the original stories that he was asexual or gay. He actually says he declines the attention of women because he doesn’t want the distraction. What does that tell you about him? Straightforward deduction. He wouldn’t be living with a man if he thought men were interesting” (Jeffries, 2012). But many plots in the show seem to conflict with his views or at least hint at another queer possibility of the interpretation between the two male characters in the show. Even Martin Freeman, who played Dr Watson, suggested in an interview that (Wightman, 2011):

Sherlock is the gayest story ever in the history of television... People certainly run with that which I’m quite happy with! But we all saw it as a love story. Not just a love story, but those two people who do love each other – a slightly dysfunctional relationship sometimes, but a relationship that works. They get results.

It has become clear that the queer interpretation of British TV drama has become a new subculture phenomenon that cannot be overlooked. It opens up the dialogue of sexual freedom and identity politics which are absent from mainstream public discourse in China. It also provides another layer to interpret British content and British culture which seems to be distinct from other foreign content that are accessible in China. Therefore, further investigations are needed to study how the interview participants engage with queer readings of British TV dramas. To what extent have *Sherlock* and other British TV dramas promoted awareness of queer culture among viewers online?

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter introduces the online cultural phenomenon of British TV dramas in China, highlighting the popularity of such dramas since 2010, when shows like *Sherlock* and *Downton Abbey* gained popularity in China. Industry commentators and streaming platforms' marketing strategies seem to suggest an association between British TV dramas and a refined matter of taste. This popularity stems from the high production values of British TV dramas, appealing to well-educated and affluent Chinese viewers. Furthermore, this chapter also introduced the queer reading subculture phenomenon associated with British TV dramas and Britain in China, a feature that appears to be uniquely British compared to the TV content from other countries.

This chapter includes a summary of four TV dramas that are frequently mentioned in interviews, helping us to understand the examination of interview data in Chapters 5 and 6. In the next two chapters, I will explore how thematic findings from the interview data can assist in understanding Chinese audiences' engagement with British TV dramas. Specifically, Chapter 5 will answer Research Question one (RQ1), which explores the reasons behind the popularity of British TV dramas in China. Chapter 6, on the other hand, will address Research Question two and its sub-questions, investigating how Chinese audiences engage with the significance of British TV dramas.

Chapter 5: Transnational Appeal of British TV Dramas in China

This chapter analyses the emerging themes and patterns from the inductive coding of the participants' interviews to further investigate the interpretation of British TV dramas among them (RQ1). As outlined in the methodology chapter, the thematic findings from the interview data are categorised based on three primary themes (Tracy, 2018): textual appreciation, queer readings of British TV dramas, and aspirational meaning-making. These themes capture participants' reception, appropriation, and personal engagement with media texts and British culture. Textual analysis is not the focus of this chapter; instead, the communicative process and the act of appropriation are the primary emphases. This chapter along with chapter 6 gives voices to the participants who provided rich and interesting insights on their reflexive journey in consuming British TV dramas.

Interview data show clear evidence of how mediated storytelling through TV series plays a crucial role in forming collective imagined perceptions of British culture, heritage, and society for Chinese audiences, which scholars call the "mediascape" (Appadurai, 1990). This imagined puzzle of Britain presented by media technology has been re-structured and reshaped in the process of consuming British TV dramas. The perceived image of British TV dramas is not necessarily reflected in the social reality of British society. Especially for the ones who have never been to the UK, their perception is primarily based on TV dramas, such as *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015), *Fleabag* (2016-2019), *Skins* (2007-2013), and *Sherlock* (2010-2017). Other programmes such as *Inside No. 9* (2014 – present) and *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) were also mentioned in the interviews and this data is also examined in Chapters 5 and 6.

The participants in this study are viewers of British, American, Japanese, Korean and Chinese TV dramas, and subsequently enables them to make comparisons in terms of social, cultural

and production values (Weissmann, 2012). In the comparison process, we can observe the apparent deviation in the participants' perceptions of TV dramas from various other countries. Thus, in this section, I discuss the transnational appeals of British TV dramas among Chinese participants regarding the frequently mentioned characteristics from interviews.

5.1 Textual Appreciation

Industry news and existing scholarship indicate that British TV dramas represent high production values to Chinese audiences (Chi and Zhao, 2016; Y.Q.Li, 2020; Zhao, 2016; Zhu, 2014). Findings show the perceived image of “high-quality” and “sophistication” in British TV dramas can be found in the textual perspectives of British TV dramas and their opposition to American counterparts and TV dramas from China, Japan, and South Korea. British TV dramas are perceived as well-made, with aesthetic values, complex characters, innovative narratives and storytelling, better characterising human nature, and addressing broader social issues than local dramas. Moreover, British TV dramas have a distinct British “style” that adds to the appeal to Chinese participants. The practice of comparing dramas with the ones under study in terms of production value is also been observed in the transnational reception of Danish TV dramas and American TV dramas (Gao, 2019; Eichner, 2020; Jensen & McCutcheon, 2020; Kaptan, 2020).

5.1.1 Portrayal of Character

Despite the geo-cultural and linguistic differences between China and Britain, participants reported a sense of connection with the characters in British TV dramas. This emotional resonance is primarily due to the perceived authenticity and emotional realism of these

characters, who cover a broad age spectrum and with imperfect appeals. Furthermore, British TV dramas are highly regarded for their perceived multi-dimensional, layered, and complex characters. The actors in British TV dramas are appreciated for their professionalism, and good acting skills. The strong female roles in the dramas are praised as full of liberal ideas and progressive values, which fostered cosmopolitan imagination for participants to reflect on (Jacobsen, 2020). These findings further confirm that complex and relatable characters contribute to what participants consider as high production value and quality TV content (Brower, 2002; Eichner, 2020; Esser 2020).

Complexity and Relatable

The character's portrayal as a villain is often multi-layered with background knowledge of their personal life and the motivations behind their actions, which adds to the complexity of their characters. MC (22, Female) talked about the multifaced character of Mary (John Watson's wife, played by Amanda Abbington) and how her feelings towards Mary are very complicated:

Mary is a powerful and mysterious character, sometimes righteous, sometimes evil. Her appearance has caused the biggest challenge in the relationship between Sherlock and John, and she has also caused conflict between them after her death. My feelings for her are very complicated, and I can't say it's love or hate.

MC (22, Female) finds the character Mary has a profound and lasting influence on the storyline, that even after her death she continues to cause conflicts between Sherlock and John. The character is both admirable and frustrating for MC, which caused her mixed emotions towards Mary.

The imperfect appearances of characters give participants a sense of authenticity and make them easier to relate to. Compared to the high standard of youth and beauty, poor acting and simple portrayal of characters in Chinese TV dramas, British TV dramas supposedly show

“real people” with real-life problems that are easier to identify with. The emotions, desires, depth and layers of a character sometimes change or transform based on storylines and personal struggles.

What I like about *Downton Abbey* is its selection of actors and actresses. They are not necessarily all good-looking; they could be average looking, somewhat overweight, disabled, etc. And that is what attracts me, very relatable to real life.

-Yiyang (28, Female)

The actors in British TV dramas are not particularly young. They are not all around 20 years old, they could be 30, 40, or even 40, 50 years old, but still very attractive...Most of the actors in British TV dramas have graduated from high-ranking universities. They are very well-educated and very professional. - MC (22, Female)

The actors in British TV dramas seem to be very hardworking and talented. Unlike our Chinese TV dramas prefer young, pretty actors that drive traffic. The difference is significant. -Jinhe (25, Male)

Participants noted that British TV dramas recruited actors with professional acting skills from a wider range of ages, and all have distinct personal characteristics and charm. The high relatability of characters in British TV dramas was especially highlighted in comparison with Chinese TV dramas: participants complained that Chinese TV dramas too often cast young and good-looking actors with less attention given to their acting skills and the TV content quality. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies on the perceived production quality of Chinese TV dramas: they have weak character work, simplistic content, and lack profound meanings in relation to social issues (Zhao, 2006).

Acting

According to the participants, the acting in British TV dramas' is more subtle and reserved, as reflected in slow-to-reveal emotions (Chapter 4) and a more introspective approach to social interactions. MC (22, Female) thinks that emotions are presented differently in British TV dramas.

British TV dramas are more restrained and introverted in terms of emotion, they don't express emotions directly. Unlike American TV dramas, they are more open, and emotions are more intense.

On the contrary, they felt that the introspective form of acting in British TV dramas made them pay more attention to nuances, such as glances and subtle gestures. MC (22, Female) talked about the subtle nuances in the acting of *Sherlock*.

The acting skills in British TV dramas are very delicate. Even a glance could give you a very different feeling. For instance, if John Watson becomes extremely emotional, his hand will shake slightly, a detail that was mentioned in the first season. In some later plot developments, there are occasional close-ups of John's hand, where it is seen shaking. For instance, in the finale of the third season, when Sherlock is about to board a plane, there is a detailed close-up shot of John's hand. This subtle focus on his hand subtly conveys that John is emotionally charged at the moment, even though he does not have an exaggerated facial expression and there are no lines in the script indicating this, his inner emotional state is indeed intense.

MC suggests the British style of acting is characterized by subtlety and nuance, and the ability to express emotions through minimalistic acting techniques. The actors often use minimal physical movements and facial expressions to convey complex emotions, which shows a high level of skill from the actors, directors, and cinematography. Such acting and style all translate to quality as it delivers complex acting skills and a high level of viewing experience.

Gender Roles

Female characters in the shows are described as “strong”, “powerful”, and “independent” by participants. Unlike in domestic dramas, where women are mainly characterised as good girls, wives and mothers, women in British TV dramas are not necessarily “good” in the conventional sense. Similar to the findings in the readings on gender roles in transnational Danish TV dramas (Eichner, 2020; Esser, 2020; Jensen & McCutcheon, 2020), participants feel empowered by the portrayal of women in British TV dramas and appreciate the modern adaptation of real women in today’s society.

In the 130 years since the birth of *Sherlock Holmes*, people’s attitudes toward women have undergone tremendous changes. The women in *Sherlock* are depicted as intelligent and hard-working, more fitting for a 21st-century audience.

In the original stories, Mary is the main character in *The Sign of the Four*, but she barely appears after getting married. She is a relatively marginalized character. Some early adaptations either erased her role completely or made her a gentle and virtuous wife. But in *Sherlock* she is an assassin, a powerful woman with a complex background. This makes it more interesting because she is not just another “boring girlfriend.” - Banbu (24, Female)

I think women in *Sherlock* are very powerful. Mrs. Hudson seems like a good-tempered landlord, but she used to be a stripper, and her late husband was a drug lord. She could protect herself when danger approached. Molly likes Sherlock, but she never loses herself or complains about anything. She is my favourite. - MC (22, Female)

It is clear that compared to the marginal portrayal of women in the original stories, the women in *Sherlock* are independent, powerful, strong-willed women who are not confined by traditional gender norms. The original stories set in the Victoria era characterised women as

possessions of men, often oppressed and sexually conservative. Participants praised that the adaptation of women characters in *Sherlock* is in line with modern society's views of feminism.

The participants were impressed by the portrayal of the transformation of women's awakening in *Downton Abbey*. The powerful collision between the women of the new era and conservative and outdated patriarchal thoughts provoked reflections on how women have historically been ignored and othered in television. In *Downton Abbey*, women's struggles and growing strength are dealt with in the changing times. Jinhe (25, Male) commented on how he was impressed by the portrayal of gender roles in the series:

There is a clear discussion of women's rights in *Downton Abbey*. The whole play unfolds against a background dominated by patriarchal discourse, but there is no lack of portrayals of female characters with liberating significance. Whether it is the characters of the countess, Mary, or the servants, it reveals that the ideas of the liberation of feminist consciousness are growing. The female characters are no longer symbolic and material but instead living individuals with their own unique and distinctive personalities. They exude self-confidence; the role of Mary, who is a strategic thinker, is especially very attractive to me.....These television works have given me a more profound impression of the issue of gender.

His perception of Mary as a strategic thinker highlights the contrast between the pre-engaged submissive stereotypes of women at the time. The series portrays women as independent, dynamic characters with distinctive personalities who embody growing feminist ideals. Despite being a period drama and work of fiction, *Downton Abbey's* approach to historical concerns is still relevant today. The series as a whole reflects the ongoing discussions of the changing status of women and the awoken feminist consciousness.

5.1.2 Narratives and Storytelling

The findings of this study indicate that participants praised the narratives and storytelling to be innovative and well-made in terms of plots often giving surprises, the intertextuality with original literature, emphasis on quality over quantity, and not glorifying of social issues. As participants recounted these characteristics of British TV dramas, comparisons were often made to the shortcomings in the American, Korean and Chinese TV dramas they watched. Their preference for the perceived “well-made” British TV dramas highlighted the taste and cultural capital of the participants. Their cultural capital and taste are reflected in their ability to appreciate British TV drama for its carefully constructed narrative, unconventional storytelling, thematic depth and originality, which are all associated with the content of quality TV. Interestingly, their notion of quality TV also incorporates the teen drama *Skins*. As Feuer (2007) suggested, the concept of quality should always be evaluated in the situated context. This perception of quality is largely informed by the Chinese participants’ life experiences and social context (Cardwell, 2007; Feuer, 2007). For them, *Skins*’ content addresses societal issues such as drug use, sex, bullying, and mental health giving them a sense of authenticity and emotional realism. This resonates with their perception of quality, as these topics are typically censored on Chinese TV.

Many participants think British TV dramas are very detail-oriented and sophisticated. Shan Gao (30, Female) believes that British TV dramas are better than American ones in terms of production value:

British and American TV dramas are very different. British ones are very exquisite, with three, six, or at most 10 episodes in each series. American ones have more episodes, and usually, the endings are pretty dull after dragging on for a long time. However, I feel like this rarely happens in British TV dramas.

The participants are attracted to British TV dramas' unpredictable plots that often give audiences surprises. Jia (25, Female) compared British TV dramas to Korean TV dramas, whose narratives and storytelling lack excitement:

I've seen Korean TV dramas before, and I feel that Korean dramas rarely have surprises. Generally speaking, you see the beginning of it, and you already know the development of the story. But British TV dramas often don't develop according to routines or your predictions. Often there are many surprises in the plot. For example, *Inside No. 9* is a very typical British dark humour and thriller series. There will always be a reversal at the end of each episode; *Fleabag* has very limited episodes, but it will always make you scream "Oh! That's why!" by the end of each episode.

Jia (25, Female) finds that Korean TV dramas are more predictable with one-dimensional storylines whereas British TV dramas like *Inside No. 9* and *Fleabag* often feature layered innovative narratives that surprise audiences with unexpected twists of emotions, comedy, horror, and suspense, which represent quality and excellence.

Some participants talked about the innovative modern spin, such as the intertextualities in *Sherlock* that echo Sherlock Holme's original stories. They were motivated to return to the books and develop a deeper understanding of the TV drama. Xialuo (18, Male) mentioned that several plots in *Sherlock* echoed the original stories with a modern spin: "The first episode of the fourth season *The Six Thatchers* echoes the original story *The Six Napoleons*, the jewellery in the original story has been changed to Mary's secret USB stick." Several episode titles on *Sherlock* were adapted from the original Sherlock Holmes stories, including "A Study in Pink" as "A Study in Scarlet"; "A Scandal in Belgravia" as "A Scandal in Bohemia"; "His Last Vow" as "His Last Bow"; "A three-patch problem" for "A three-pipe problem" (Pearson, 2019). The use of new technology also echoes the original stories in Sherlock's use of early forensic

science (Evans, 2012). “It’s like looking for Easter eggs. No matter how many times you have watched it, you can always find something new”, says Momo (20, Female). The new modern adaptations keep surprising participants with new meanings and innovative ideas.

Furthermore, Chinese participants found that supporting actors in *Sherlock* have a modern spin with very distinct characteristics and personalities compared to the original Holmes stories. Their performances and storylines made the portrayal of the characters and the plot of *Sherlock* more vivid and exciting.

Moriarty is no longer the old professor; he is a young man who controls the huge criminal networks in London. He has excellent computer skills; it’s like he is controlling the world of the Internet. - Xialuo (18, Male)

Dr. Watson is no longer a bystander. The original Sherlock Holmes story was presented from Watson’s diary angle. His character design was quite boring, like a dispensable person, easy to be ignored by the audience... in the BBC *Sherlock*, they made Sherlock and Watson equally important like they both are protagonists. It shows how important his role is. - Summer (22, Female)

Compared to the innovative narratives and storytelling in British TV dramas, participants often consider Chinese TV dramas to convey values that glorify societal issues, making the plots unrealistic and boring. For instance, Wuqi (30, Male) considers British TV dramas to be more true-to-life, while Chinese TV dramas often show a glorification of reality and are more political. He thinks the development of the plot of *Skins* is in line with the direction that actual events should take; rather than forcing the actors to perform in a way that conveys an unrealistic value:

At least the producer (of *Skins*) didn’t force them into being a “good boy” or something. These kids would do what they want and maybe in the end they will

realise what is right or wrong. It is a growing journey. But if this show is in China, these kids will have to become a “good boy” or “good girl” in the end.

Wuqi (30, Male) found the lives of the teenagers in *Skins* to be exciting but sometimes overwhelming. However, he respects the design of the narratives as they are true to life compared to the illogical narratives seen in Chinese TV dramas, which often deliberately create positive narratives that do not reflect the real side of society. In addition to the critique about superficial content and low production values of Chinese TV dramas (Zhao, 2006), it appears that such dramas also impose a deliberate ideology onto audiences which is not perceived in British TV dramas – the latter seem to respect a more realistic psychological development of their characters. Therefore, it is clear to see that Wuqi feels a sense of emotional realism with the narratives of *Skins*, even though he personally finds the behaviours in the dramas difficult to agree upon

5.1.3 Country-specific content

As Britain is geo-linguistically removed from China, participants do not share similar language and cultural backgrounds with Britain. The findings of this thesis challenge the cultural discount theory, which suggests that transnational TV content would discourage audiences’ engagement due to unfamiliar norms and references (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988). On the contrary, these findings add to the growing body of evidence suggesting that it is precisely the differences and otherness in transnational television dramas that add value to the viewer experience (Esser, 2020; Jacobsen, 2020; Morimoti, 2015; O’Regan, 1992; Straubhaar & La Palestina, 2007; Weissmann, 2012). For those young and educated Chinese who have a cosmopolitan outlook and are more exposed to Western cultures and lifestyles, cultural differences have become attractions rather than cultural discounts. The participants reported that British TV dramas

bring a sense of strangeness and unfamiliarity in terms of language (British accents), cultural codes (humour), and country-specific content (landscapes, cityscapes, historical events, literature), which in a way makes British TV dramas more exciting and attractive. Therefore, having a certain level of cultural capital is seen as the precondition of enjoying this “strangeness” that associates with British TV dramas.

British Accent

Growing up learning American English, participants mentioned British accents as challenging to understand; however, the accent is also considered to be a representation of “sophistication”, “niche”, and “sexy”. Straubhaar and La Palestina’s cultural proximity concept argues that the transnational flows of television dramas have been closely linked to cultural, linguistic, and ethnic proximity and geography (2007). This is true to some extent, as Britain is linguistically and culturally distant from China. However, even for participants who are fluent in English, the British accent adds a sense of strangeness to them.

Xiaotong (30, Female) said, “I’m super bad at understanding British accents. If I don’t read the subtitles, I’m like, oh my god, did I really learn English?” This strangeness of the British accent has, in a way, become an attraction for many participants. They consider the British accent to be a classier and niche accent. “I thought the American accent was way nicer than the British accent before I watched *Sherlock*. Now I think the British accent is SOOOOO nice,” said Jiexi (22, Female). It is clear to see that participants are well aware of the symbolic capital the British accent carries, learning to use it helps to improve their perceived social attributes. More discussions will follow in section 6.1.2.

Humour

All participants experienced some degree of cultural discount when it comes to British humour. However, many overcome this difficulty through repeated viewing and learning. Consequently, British humour has become an attraction for their viewing experience. This finding contributes to the growing body of literature suggesting that cultural discount and a sense of otherness can enhance the appeal of transnational television dramas (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988; O'Regan, 1992; Straubhaar & La Palestina, 2007; Weissmann, 2012; Morimoti, 2015; Esser, 2020; Jacobsen, 2020). This also implies that obtaining a certain level of cultural capital is a precondition for decoding British content, thereby enabling the acquisition of cosmopolitan capital through British TV dramas. It is clear that the ability to appreciate British humour, which requires a certain level of cultural awareness and knowledge, can be seen as a form of cultural capital. The way the participants express their preference for British TV dramas over easily accessible American TV dramas shows them distinguishing themselves from others. It sets the participants apart from the less knowledgeable others in terms of their taste in television. Further discussions will follow at section 6.2.

A lack of cultural knowledge of Britain has posed difficulties for participants in decoding the puns and jokes in *Sherlock*. "I have to think about it before I laugh," Lubian (25, Female) said in a self-mocking way. Despite the challenges posed by not fully recognising or comprehending British humour, several participants expressed their determination to learn to appreciate it through repeated consumption of the same content, including Qing (28, Female), an English language lecturer. Several have pointed out that British humour is very dry and sarcastic and it took them a while to understand it.

British humour is dry but with a strong sense of irony at its core. British humour maintains a relatively introverted shell of "I am doing the decent thing and saying

the decent thing”. However, the essence is absurd or completely ironic, making it even more ironic. -Jiexi (22, Female)

British dramas are not deliberately funny. I wasn't used to this kind of British-style humour when I first started watching British dramas. I didn't find it funny at all. But after I get to know more British TV dramas, I re-watched some of the series that I had seen before and realised: OH! This part was supposed to be funny! -MC (22, Female)

The humour of British TV dramas is difficult to understand, and sometimes you need to watch it carefully twice or even a third time. It is not something that you can understand right away. On the contrary, American TV dramas are more straightforward. The humour in American dramas is very obvious. Coupled with more body language, you can easily understand the jokes in American dramas. -Qing (28, Female)

British TV dramas seem to require careful viewing and multiple watches to grasp the often dry and sarcastic humour. As Qing pointed out that American humour is more straightforward and easy to comprehend due to its universal jokes and richness in body and facial expressions, in addition to requiring less cultural knowledge. MC (22, Female) believes that is because domestic dramas have copied plots and narratives from popular American TV dramas such as *Friends*, which could be one of the reasons that people are familiar with similar jokes and ways of storytelling. It is the existence of these plagiarised plots that makes her feel that American TV dramas are easy to understand.

I have no problems understanding American TV series. The first American TV drama I watched was *Friends*. I had no difficulties in understanding it at all. The problem could be that domestic TV dramas *iPartment* (爱情公寓) have copied a lot of plots from *Friends*. I first watched *iPartment* and then watched *Friends*. The plagiarized plots and jokes have paved the way for me to understand American TV dramas better.

Although America is also culturally and geographically removed from China, most participants found American TV dramas more familiar and easier to understand than British ones. This familiarity with American cultural codes could be connected to years of distributing Hollywood films and American TV dramas in China prior to the popularity of the recent British ones. British TV dramas require a higher level of cultural capital as a precondition to transforming the unfamiliar into the familiar.

British “Style”

Many participants praised the aesthetic values, the portrayals of country landscapes, and the refined presentation of history and culture in British TV dramas. The finding demonstrates that it is precisely this uniquely Britishness that draws participants’ attention. As Gugu (20, Male) commented, “The visual aesthetic is stunning.” Xiaotong (30, Female) further confirmed this opinion and said,

The general colour palette of British TV dramas is often on the cooler side, something I find particularly attractive. It’s perhaps a reflection of the British character and the distinct features of their homeland. The cool-toned visuals provide a viewing experience that isn’t overwhelming but rather enjoyable.

In addition to this, the exquisite costumes and sophisticated ways of living presented in British TV dramas have often been appreciated as “quality” (Chapman, 2014). This compelling “British style” stimulates viewer interest and underscores the importance of localized features in driving the global appeal of such dramas. It challenges the theory of cultural discount and further confirms that place-specific content and cultural stereotypes can enhance the appeal of transnational TV dramas to foreign audiences (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988; Morimoti, 2015; Esser, 2020). The findings suggest that British TV dramas are valued for their deep historical roots, attention to detail, respect for customs and traditions, and cultural representation. They appear

to offer a distinctive viewing experience that resonates with audiences seeking cultural-inspired and sophisticated storytelling.

Christine Berberich (2006, p.207) argued that “Englishness inevitably appears tinged with nostalgia and consistently evokes pictures of an older, more tranquil England, an England of times gone by.” Bergin’s (2012) suggestion posits that a globalized nostalgia for English rural life is primarily based on portrayals of English life in novels, films, and television programmes. Similarly, for some participants who have never been to Britain, their imagination is profoundly influenced by the British content they have accessed. As Summer (22, Female) said, “I just love the gentleman culture (presented in British films and TV dramas)”, many participants’ perception of Britain is constructed based on the old, British stereotype that is presented in their cultural products.

Shan Gao (30, Female) considers the high production quality of British TV series is reflected in all aspects, such as the length of the dramas, the delicate restoration of the costume and traditions, and the respect for historical events, especially in comparison to the lengthy anticlimactic plots of some American TV dramas and the tedious content of Chinese dramas.

Take *Downton Abbey* as an example. It’s more refined regarding clothing, makeup and shooting locations. I have always felt that British TV dramas are more refined, whether in character portrayal, acting skills, storylines, and even scripts. Especially in the adaptations of some classic masterpieces, the degree of restoration is really high.

The distinctive Britishness is particularly reflected in the costumes and the pursuit of tradition. Interested in the vintage fashion presented in *Downton Abbey*, Linyu (27, Male) was deeply impressed by the exquisiteness of the clothing and the changing trends in *Downton Abbey* through various periods:

I paid much attention to the changes in the clothing in *Downton Abbey*. You can see the changes of the fashion trend from the costumes of the actors through time. From the conservative long skirts and long sleeves from the early conservative post-Victorian Edwardian era to the Art Deco style straight, long skirts in the 1920s.

Baena and Byker (2015, p.259) suggest that *Downton Abbey*'s positioning of "nostalgia as a form of Englishness epitomised by the country estate produces the kind of narrative that simultaneously evokes an idealised past and challenges our contemporary collective memory of that period." They suggested the visual beauty displayed around Downton also triggers nostalgic feelings among its viewers: "Downton stands as a visual construction of an image of Englishness composed of numerous non-verbal signifiers: clothing (for all characters), lawns, furniture, tableware, linens, crystal lamps, etc., as well as exquisite social manners or the beauty of the English landscape on which the camera lingers so lovingly and effectively" (Baena and Byker, 2015, p.263).

Linyu (27, Male) believes that the styles presented in British TV dramas demonstrate Britain's rich cultural heritage and history. He considers British TV dramas provide more profound and sophisticated content than American dramas.

You can learn about the mindsets of British people from British TV dramas. They still want to maintain the traditions of "old style" and "gentlemanly style", but you can also see their mocking attitude towards life. Compared to American TV dramas, British TV dramas give me a sense of "style" from a historical perspective. Britain's cultural heritage and social atmosphere are relatively deeper than that of the United States.

From exquisite costumes to noble manners, Linyu (27, Male) perceives the Britishness in British TV dramas as a way of moving on to modernity without losing cultural tradition.

Moreover, it is precisely this style of Britishness that makes British TV dramas stand out as being the representation of “taste” and “quality” in his eyes.

Jia (25, Female) considers British content to be uniquely British while American content is more commercial orientated targeting mass audiences:

I think the British TV drama is very similar to the country’s characters. American TV drama is commercial, and British TV drama is sophisticated. Each episode [of British TV drama] is very well designed, and each detail is worthy of scrutiny.

Sharing similar opinions, Rai (26, Female) believes that American TV dramas are more accessible than their British counterparts because they offer a more comprehensive range of content and require less local cultural knowledge to gain a broader appreciation of the work. British TV dramas, however, have a uniquely British style. Their choice of dialogue, use of in-jokes, locations and costumes are all designed to appeal primarily to British specificity (Esser, 2020). Rai (26, Female) thinks British TV dramas often carry a sense of pride of their national identity,

You can feel the “pride” in British TV dramas. Everything they create has a sense of pride. It’s like, I will not change anything for you. If you don’t like me, there will always be people who appreciate me. And the American shows just sell whatever is popular at the time.

Rai’s comment also suggests that preference for British TV dramas is seen as a form of social distinction. The pride she is referring to shows a sense of class status and prestige that is rooted in British rich cultural heritage. By consuming British TV dramas, one can differentiate themselves from the “lower others” who watch American TV dramas which are more commercial-driven and with less cultural roots.

Several participants noted the perceived “pride” in demonstrating British identity as something Chinese would easily relate to culturally. As Jiexi (22, Female) observed: “The British are fervent and adhere to their traditions, and they have great pride in their history, just like we feel about our country.” Jinhe (25, Male) echoed this sentiment, suggesting a parallel emotional connection between Chinese viewers and their culture to that exhibited by the British with theirs. The sense of “pride” embedded in British TV dramas comes from pride in their country’s rich traditions and history:

It can be seen from all aspects that the British are fanatical and abide by traditions. They have a strong sense of pride in their history, as we Chinese do with ours. Britain’s rich historical and cultural heritage and traditional temperament attract me the most.

Jiexi and Jinhe’s comments all suggest that they feel a sense of emotional realism with British TV dramas, despite being culturally different from them. They identify with the pride in history and traditions that the British have presented in their television dramas, as how they feel about their Chinese culture and heritage. The participants’ interest in British TV dramas extends beyond the simple appreciation of tradition, history, and culture represented within them. They are equally captivated by the portrayal of cultural confidence that these dramas encompass.

Overall, the perceived “quality” of British TV dramas extends beyond textual appreciation. It encompasses the depth of these dramas and their engagement with societal issues - factors that trigger reflection, provoke critical thinking, and resonate with the participants. Furthermore, the unique Britishness carries symbolic values, highlighting the taste and cultural capital of the participants. This preference distinguishes them from others who prefer content from other countries.

5.2 Queer Readings of British TV Dramas

The numerous queer elements in *Sherlock* have widened the views of many Chinese fans and started public debates about sexuality and gender roles. Participants' impressions of Britain and British TV dramas often included the term "Fu Guo" (rotten country) and "Fu Ju" (rotten dramas), which can be roughly translated to gay country and gay dramas in Chinese popular culture (Chapter 4). The LGBTQ discussions triggered by British TV dramas are challenging China's policy towards homosexuality, where LGBTQ culture is still discriminated against and has recently been banned on television programmes. Findings show evidence that Britain's mediascape has significantly been shaped by the queer readings of British TV dramas. The image of Britain has been enriched from the cultural stereotypes of "nobility", "gentlemen", and "royalty" to more multi-faceted representation with modern liberal meanings. The findings also suggest a self-observant shift in attitudes towards LGBTQ communities after watching British TV dramas, which implies a change in recognition and acceptance of same-sex relationships. This demonstrates how media exposure can shape views on societal issues and challenge dominant ideologies.

Previous studies of British TV dramas address queer readings as the "edgy" content that young audiences consume (Zhu, 2014; Y.Q.Li, 2020). However, these studies lack critical examination of the interpretation of queer readings on British TV dramas and British culture in general. The widespread interest in queer readings of British TV dramas has contributed to promoting Chinese participants' awareness of sexual minorities and triggered reflection on traditional gender roles in Chinese society. The high level of attention on such topics illustrates the young people's concerns, frustrations, curiosity, and yearning for a freer and more liberal societal environment in terms of rights and individualism. Therefore, I argue that the queer

readings of British TV dramas facilitate a cosmopolitan imagination of globalisation that allow participants to reflect and challenge the heterosexual dominance in global culture.

Becker (1998, p.36) argued that the emerging “gay politics” in television dramas attract “sophisticated, upscale, college-educated and liberally minded adults”, which fits the demographics of the participants recruited in this study. British TV dramas are far more than entertainment and a learning toolkit for young, well-educated Chinese audiences. They are also used as a guidebook for self-development, a mirror for self-reflection, and a community platform that offers a safe haven for discussing socially challenging topics. Some participants consider themselves very liberal-minded people. Watching British TV dramas does not necessarily broaden their worldview, but the diverse topics such dramas draw on are what attracts them. MC (22, Female) thinks queer elements may not be a surprise to many audiences: “I think people who chose to watch TV dramas with queer elements already have a considerable amount of knowledge about LGBTQ culture”. However, for many participants, such TV content and public debates exposed them to other ways of living they did not know much about before and aroused their desire to explore.

I have changed a lot. I never discriminate against homosexuality; I just don't know much about it. After I watched *Sherlock*, I started discussing “Johnlock” theories with others; I got to know a lot more about LGBTQ culture, I'm much more aware of it now. - Lubian (25, Female)

When I first heard about this “Johnlock” coupling theory, I didn't believe it at all...I just thought they were two men, and there was no way the editors would let them become a couple. But later on, I realized that was just orthodoxy thinking. Especially in Chinese television programmes and films, heterosexuality is the norm. It would be impossible for two men to be together. And if you think about it, Sherlock and John's relationship was definitely possible for people to assume they were a couple. This is

a cultural clash for me because I had never thought about it this way before. - Banbu
(24, Female)

Like Banbu and Lubian, many young participants consider British TV drama, in particular *Sherlock*, to have served as an enlightening and thought-provoking experience for promoting awareness about sexual minorities. For many, this was not the first time they had heard of sexual minorities but their interest in *Sherlock* played an important role in triggering their reflections on sexual freedom.

Sharing similar ideas, Shan Gao (30, Female) and Rai (26, Female) believe that British TV dramas provide a good channel for Chinese audiences to enrich their knowledge of society and others. Things that seem abnormal in the eyes of Chinese audiences often spark intense debates on the Internet, prompting people to reflect and think critically about their own societal issues.

There is very little sex education in schools in China. Chinese parents don't usually discuss heterosexual relationships at home, let alone homosexuality. When people come into contact with such a topic, they might want to discuss it with others, or look up related information. At least it provides opportunities for people to get to know that homosexuality exists in the world. British TV dramas could be a medium for them, right? - Shan Gao (30, Female)

I think British TV drama has some role in promoting LGBTQ culture in China. Like the word "rotten country", basically when everyone talks about Britain, that is, young people, of course, not the older generation, will use the phrase "rotten country", which represents gay. This shows a kind of advancement in our recognition of same-sex relationships. - Rai (26, Female)

In particular, Chinese participants interpreted the LGBTQ element in British TV dramas mainly from two perspectives: the broad coverage of LGBTQ topics; and how the gay community is portrayed in a non-discriminatory "subtle" manner. This "subtleness" comes not

only from portraying characters' gay identity – they were presented as ordinary people – it also comes from the heterosexual characters in the show who do not treat gays differently due to their sexuality.

The presentations of homosexuality in British TV dramas are very natural. They did not specifically emphasize that someone is homosexual or treat them differently. British actors also act like ordinary people when performing roles with different sexual orientations. It is acceptable for them to play the role of a homosexual or heterosexual person. However, if an actor plays such a role in China, it may become a dark spot for them. People will attack them by saying this person acts like a homosexual for fame and money. People would ridicule the straight actors for being involved in a queerbaiting narrative. - Banbu (24, Female)

When I was studying in the UK, I saw that being gay was particularly common, and I didn't feel that they were treated differently from others or discriminated against. And this is exactly how they present LGBTQ in British TV dramas. We are all the same. - Shan Gao (30, Female)

It's very interesting. They have the balls to talk about this [LGBTQ] in Britain, but in China, you don't. So, this is the only way we can get to know it. So, [because] it's something you can talk about in Britain, but we can't in China, it's something we will pay more attention to. - Wuqi (30, Male)

Participants suggest people who are gay are not paid extra attention because of their identity but are instead treated like ordinary people in British TV dramas. Such a portrayal is not common for them because LGBTQ content is often ridiculed – the opposite of how such content is treated in British TV dramas. Therefore, Chinese audiences would pay extra attention to the LGBTQ elements in British TV dramas precisely because their attitude towards sexual minorities is “calm” and indiscriminate. It is crucial to consider how varied cultural settings might lead to different readings of media texts and trigger alternative ways of thinking. Such

perceptions are interpreted based on participants' lived experiences as LGBTQ topics and communities are still considered taboo in Chinese society.

Upon questioning why exclusively British TV dramas are considered as “gay dramas”, MC (22, Female) drew a comparison between US, UK and Chinese dramas in the way these three countries present LGBTQ cultures, based on the content she has watched:

It's not that the American shows I've watched don't have the LGBTQ element, but they usually will tell you straight away; for example, *Queer as Folk*, they will tell you half or more than half of the characters in this show are gay or lesbian. If it's a British television drama, everything is subtle; you might think what they had was definitely love, but they never said it out loud; the producers wouldn't admit it either... It's also very different from Chinese series, where they use homosexuality as a selling point, especially when the social environment does not allow them to make programmes with homosexual elements... they will purposely change this relationship to friendship.

MC's (22, Female) reflections on the policy towards LGBTQ elements in domestic dramas underscore the significance of British TV dramas to Chinese audiences: it does not “scream” LGBTQ content as the American ones might do, and it does not get mocked as it does in Chinese shows. The presentation of LGBTQ culture in British TV dramas is perceived as subtle and normalised. Although TV dramas from other foreign countries also feature LGBTQ content, they do not draw as much attention in the Chinese market as British TV dramas did. As LGBTQ communities are often ridiculed, lacking a positive and unbiased portrayal in Chinese television, it is often seen that same-sex characters are deliberately portrayed as engaged in friendship or brotherhood. To avoid being censored on Chinese television, ambiguous hints of homosexuality between male characters are subtly implied on screen.

However, the queer themes in British TV dramas have cultivated misunderstandings about Britain and LGBTQ community among some participants who have drawn conclusions about from TV series that do not correspond with reality. Lan (24, Female) believes that LGBTQ culture has its origin in the UK, incorrectly stating that “The reason we call Britain the rotten country is that Britain is the birthplace of homosexuality. Britain is the first country where homosexuality is legal.” Such an interpretation was not uncommon during the interviews. For instance, Banbu (24, Female) talked about her understanding of “Rotten Country”:

Perhaps because there are more gays in Britain, being gay is widely accepted in the UK and is legal. However, it is still taboo in China, so Chinese people would find this gay concept pretty new and exciting; that’s why we would give them the nickname “rotten”. Also, British films and TV dramas are full of gay elements, but there is not so much in American ones. The more British TV dramas people watch, the more they are exposed to such a concept, so naturally, people will connect “gay” with Britain. However, here “rotten” is more of a mocking word. It is not positive but not negative either. It’s a neutral term.

This finding is consistent with earlier studies of cultivation theory which suggest that exposure to television and a lack of direct contact with real-world issues combine to produce an artificial reality for audiences (Hawkins & Pingree, 1980; Shrum, 2001; Shrum & Bischak, 2001). It also aligns with Petzold’s study which suggest that virtual mobility can facilitate a more superficial engagement with distant others (2017). As stated earlier, the cause of this information gap and understanding bias could be related to participants’ living experiences (Eichner, 2020). Such as a lack of sex education in schools or public discussions on sexual freedom, information restrictions, and a lack of media representation of the LGBTQ community in Chinese society. However, regardless of the misunderstandings and biases, the silver lining here is that discussions about sexuality raised by British TV dramas have attracted the attention of many Chinese audiences. Therefore, the perceived inaccurate images of Britain

in the surrounding debates could be the first step in eliminating discrimination and prejudice in the long term.

Linyu (27, Male) has a different view of why the LGBTQ element in British TV dramas has stirred such a big storm in China. He argued that queer readings became so popular because young people want to be special and use perceived liberal readings as a way to transcend others and live a cosmopolitan life (Friedman, 2000; Beck, 2002; Delanty, 2006):

The topic of LGBTQ is relatively easy to attract discussions about social issues on the Internet. The word “homosexuality” still remains taboo in China, which will attract more attention in society. The young generations show their radical values or so-called superiority by resisting the more conservative orthodox values that consider LGBTQ culture negative. Young Chinese want to show their uniqueness. That is why there is such a deviation in the perception of Britain on the Internet and in real life.

Like Linyu (27, Male), Xialuo (18, Male) also considers the queer reading of *Sherlock* as an act of attention-seeking from the young generation in rejecting mainstream ideology. While some Chinese participants embrace queer readings and homonormative ideology in the show, Xialuo (18, Male) has an antagonistic view against it. He has been reading Sherlock Holmes stories since he was seven years old; he is loyal to the original works and expressed strong disagreement with queer interpretations:

Some fans started the “homoerotic” trend just for the sake of attention-seeking... Sexual orientation is a matter of principle; it affects the portrayal of the character and the subsequent plot. Since the series is about Sherlock Holmes, the character should be the original Sherlock. If you want to fabricate a gay detective character, then do not call the show Sherlock Holmes.

For long-term Sherlock Holmes fans like Xialuo (18, Male), queer readings have challenged their childhood interpretations of their favourite texts. This protection of a relationship with a

text usually forged earlier in life is what Proctor calls “totemic nostalgia” (2017, p.1106). The likes and dislikes are all parts of interpretations and can produce just as many meanings and identifications (Gary, 2003; Jenkins, 1992). Linyu and Xialuo’s remarks on queer readings are questioning whether Chinese people engage in such readings to achieve social distinctions to differentiate themselves from their less “open-minded” peers (Friedman, 2000). They are also challenging the idea of whether Chinese audiences consume diverse cultural products to differentiate themselves from those who cannot decode and appreciate liberal ideas (Bourdieu, 1984; Yan, 2009; Jiang & Leung, 2012; G.C.Li, 2020).

Queer readings were long considered “othered” and “less valuable when it is associated with the feminine” (Hampton, 2015, p.231). However, in terms of the social situation in China, such a strategy has stirred up debates and opened up other possibilities of interpretation of popular culture for many young Chinese. The popularity of queer readings can be seen as empowerment for audiences to challenge the idea of fixed gender roles and sexuality.

5.3 Aspirational Meaning-making

Consistent with the literature on the global success of transnational TV dramas, findings in this thesis show that participants are drawn to British TV dramas for their perceived realism of social issues (Esser, 2020; Jensen & McCutcheon, 2020; Eichner, 2020; Jacobsen, 2020). Participants find British TV dramas address various topics covering social issues that are rarely covered in Chinese films and TV dramas in challenging and thought-provoking ways. As Shan Gao (30, Female) said: “It is rare to see discussions on social issues in Chinese TV dramas. For example, topics on homosexuality, parents getting a divorce, and young people living by themselves are particularly common in British TV dramas. These possible situations in society are unreservedly shown in their TV dramas.”

Similar to previous studies on the transnational reception of Danish TV dramas found audiences are drawn to relevant themes in media texts that resonate with people's lifeworlds and emotions (Eichner, 2020; Jensen & McCutcheon, 2020). Even though people's social environments and cultural backgrounds differ, participants typically share similar social and life challenges. The participants talked about their own experiences that resonate with content in *Sherlock*, *Fleabag* and *Skins*: such as gender politics; working one's way up in a big city; having to meet high expectations from society and family; suffering from a lack of aid and companionship in Chinese society as a mentally ill individual; the absence of discourse about sexual minorities to identify with; and being one's unique self. The emotional realism allows them to identify with the loneliness, hardship and struggles that many characters in British TV dramas go through (Jensen & McCutcheon, 2020). It gives people a sense of "reality" with which they can identify and reflect on their own lived experiences. Many participants found that the media texts of British TV dramas resonated with them in a very personal and reflexive way, which provided aspirational meanings for them to identify with. Although television dramas cannot fully represent a country and its cultures, customs and traditions, they still offer people the ability to reflect on their "own culture and habituated thinking paradigms" (Qu, 2011, p.302). Therefore, this section discusses how participants make sense of the values and social norms they are confronted with in British TV dramas, as well as the criticisms they make towards the social norms and beliefs in British TV dramas.

5.3.1 Sexual Identity

While there is a lack of a significant change in accepting LGBTQ culture in domestic TV productions and Chinese society, participants find resonance in British TV dramas to identify with. Findings show that the attention and discussions about homosexuality inspired by British

TV dramas are considered to carry positive meanings to queer community. The unprecedented increase in discussions on LGBTQ provided a medium for queer participants to seek companionship, empowerment and broader acceptance. Despite the cultural and geographical distance between the UK and China, participants feel the emotional realism to characters' experiences. Hence, drawing on Jenkins' (2015) idea that the perceived correlation between popular culture and real-world concerns carries civic significance and may lead to increased political agency, I argue that the reflections and negotiations participants made of the queer readings of British TV dramas carry civic values and could empower them to engage in more political dialogues concerning sexual minorities in China.

Wuqi (30, Male) was interviewed in fluent English. As part of the LGBTQ community himself, he expressed that the heated discussions surrounding British TV dramas and the term "rotten country" have brought him some comfort and a feeling of acceptance: "I am gay myself, so it makes me feel so comfortable to watch *that* kind of movie and watch *that* kind of drama." He thinks the popularity of queer readings of British TV dramas is positive for sexual minorities in China. Upon asking whether he considers "*Rotten (gay)*" to be a negative reading of British TV dramas, he said "I don't think it's a negative term. I think, for me, it's a positive term....When people talk about homosexuality with a less taboo attitude, even in the sense of entertainment, it shows a good sign of acceptance". He believes that the amount of attention given to sexual minorities in British TV dramas will advance the understanding and awareness of sexual minorities thus potentially promoting a more tolerant society. It makes him feel represented and validated as more and more people like and praise the queer readings of British TV dramas. With similar opinions as Wuqi, Qing (28, Female) said, "*Rotten* may be a derogatory term at the beginning, but considering homosexuality is more widely accepted now, I think it has become a joking term, or some people see it as a loving term".

Although their feelings towards the ridicule of LGBTQ culture cannot represent the whole LGBTQ community, one cannot ignore the significant exposure the queer discussions of British TV dramas have given to gay communities in China. Wuqi (30, Male) continued to say that many of the LGBTQ elements represented in British TV dramas sometimes hit too close to home, making him feel more disappointed and helpless about his social surroundings (in China).

I remember the TV show *In the Flesh* [2013-2014]. It's about a zombie that puts on makeup and lives like a real person because the government asked them to do that. They have a lot of different conflicts with the zombies. The zombies killed a lot of people and they have to live together again. And the zombie is also gay. So, when we watch it, it feels so depressing because we are in the same situation. It reflects on us, the LGBTQ community in the world. We can connect a lot to the tragedy that happened to this boy. And then the story has to go on about how to live his life and how to find himself... that is really touching.

Wuqi (30, Male) discussed the gay zombie's destiny with his friend, who also belongs to the LGBTQ community. He talked about how they both felt sadness and became emotional while watching this drama. He found the characters in the series to be relatable, inspiring and empowering.

I recommended it to a friend, and he cried for every episode. It is very sad, but for me, it's meaningful. Because the boy [on the TV] is very strong. He was fragile, and he killed himself because his beloved boy left him for the army. However, after he became a zombie, he came back to life. He was like, I have to face it. So, when you are pushed into a corner too hard, you have nowhere to go, you have to fight back, you have to do something. That is something I have learnt from this drama. And we can reflect on something happening in (Chinese) society.

In the Flesh [2013-2014] offered spiritual symbols for Wuqi and his companions to resonate with and reflect on. Although the story is fictional, the portrayal of the injustice suffered by the gay community in the series made him reflect more deeply on the situation of LGBTQ

communities in China. The emotional realism perceived in these dramas empowered him to confront the injustice LGBTQ communities face in Chinese society.

Another participant, Chenai (18, Female), is a self-described “hardcore *Sherlock* fan.” She lived in the US as a child with her mum for a year, and she considers herself familiar with Western cultures. She has organised *Sherlock* fan meetups and screening events, where fans binge-watch seasons of *Sherlock* together. She noticed there had not been many binge-watching meetup events for *Sherlock* fandom compared to other fan communities, so she organised a themed event titled “Johnlock Coupling.” She mentioned the reason for organising a slash themed event was because “after all, we all hope Sherlock and John can be together.” However, she expressed many homophobic views during our first interview. She explained that she is against homosexuality and does not think people should keep promoting or raising awareness of it. Contrary to her strong opinions, she considers that promoting “Johnlock Coupling” has nothing to do with LGBTQ culture, “it is different, it is not in real life... I don’t know why. It is just different.” Chenai (18, Female) clearly separates her opinions and fictional fantasies. The fiction world is like a window for her to freely enjoy her sexual fantasy and pleasure between same-sex characters with no moral restraint while holding on to her conservative values towards LGBTQ rights in real life. To put it succinctly, she clearly disconnected the fictional world from the real world and applied different social norms and values to both worlds. However, the follow-up interviews suggested other explanations for such behaviour. A year later, I had the chance to have a second interview with Chenai (18, Female) about the *Sherlock* slash fanfictions she had been writing about. She had moved to the UK since our first interview:

I have never written slash fiction that is not based on TV series, but if I do, I think I would want to let people know that homosexual people and heterosexual people have no difference. They are also human beings, and they can also feel happiness

and sadness in their life. I want to emphasise the difficulties gay people face in life. It is a beautiful thing to be able to love each other in this society. I want people to know more about what gay people are like.

When I asked why her attitude towards the LGBTQ community had changed so much within a year, she seemed very relaxed and pleased to tell me that she finally came to the realization that she is bisexual. Living in the UK gave her more freedom to express who she is. The many LGBTQ pride parades and events made her feel prouder about her own identity and gave her confidence in coming out as who she is.

When we talked last time, I was still doubting myself. I didn't dare to admit my sexuality, didn't dare to even think about it. But coming to study in the UK made me reflect on my life. That's why I want people to hold less prejudice toward the LGBTQ community. My mum and I are Christian, and she is very religious. Being gay is considered a big sin in our religion. I remember calling my mum from the UK and coming out to her on the phone. She said I was seduced by the devil. I cried for a whole week. But lately, she is finally starting to accept me as who I am.

Chenai (18, Female) had been hiding her identity due to pressure from her family, religion and society. She only found the courage to face her sexuality after moving to the UK. Although engaging and organizing slash-themed "Johnlock" activities and writing "boys love" fanfiction did not necessarily play a crucial role in making her confront her own sexuality, it did offer a safe haven for her to negotiate her identity and test the moral boundaries of the Chinese society within fan communities that are more LGBTQ friendly. The second interview extended Li's (2009) argument and further explored the possibilities of some of the dilemmas Chinese slash fans could have been facing: insecurities about exposing one's own sexual identity; the restrictions of religion; ties to conservative families; disapproval from society; and lack of companionship.

While the aforementioned cases provide interesting insights, they do not show enough evidence of a broad acceptance of sexual minorities among Chinese audiences, nor would they indicate significant societal progress. Nevertheless, the debates prompted by LGBTQ topics in British TV dramas provide opportunities for taboo and societal issues to be openly discussed. Such open dialogues allow LGBTQ communities in China to find their social allies and experience a sense of companionship. Additionally, they provide LGBTQ communities with cultural artefacts enable reflection and resonate.

5.3.2 Emotional Realism

Several participants highlighted the relatability of the characters and storylines they encounter in British TV dramas, touching upon themes like personal growth, the longing for intimacy, life's challenges, or self-improvement. Despite the considerable geographic distance separating them from Britain, they nonetheless built profound emotional connections with British TV dramas. The participants feel resonated with British TV dramas' characters in terms of emotions, struggles and aspirations, therefore creating a sense of closeness or emotional realism. Such emotional realism aligns with findings from studies examining the reception of Danish TV dramas, where participants expressed "associated with a feeling of lifeworld or societal nearness to the characters" (Jensen & McCutcheon, 2020, p.175; Eichner, 2020). British TV dramas offer cultural materials that are apparently lacking in domestic TV for participants to identify with. These dramas inspire participants to reflect on their personal life struggles and anxieties, with the adventurous and free-spirited characters motivating some to challenge family and societal expectations.

Participants talked about their personal growth and value reflections in the processing of consuming TV content they feel connected to. They are inspired to break free of social restraints and live in a place where differences are accepted and respected. The perceived resonances felt by participants are close to their personal struggles and life experiences and inspired them to reflect on their lives (Eichner, 2020; Jensen & McCutcheon, 2020). In particular, participants find emotional connections with modern dramas that feature urban life. “Life is just like this” was mentioned multiple times during my interviews when discussing *Fleabag*. Many participants are young Chinese who moved to big cities like Beijing and Shanghai and, in a way, they relate to the heroine Fleabag’s life in London. To many, balancing work and life in a fast-paced city can be tough and often lonely. Xiaotong (30, Female) found the life struggles of Fleabag (the character) very relatable to her own life experiences, which often led her to reflect on her life and re-examine the future she is striving for:

I was feeling depressed for a long time after seeing *Fleabag*. Even though it had such a big impact on me, I still liked it very much. It made me realise that no matter how hard you try to live your life, you always have to face the things you are trying to escape from. No matter how hard you try, you might still have to live with your struggles forever.

Fleabag captures Xiaotong’s frustrations of living alone in a big and competitive city like Shanghai. She learned from *Fleabag* that not all problems have solutions, and she has to face them instead of running away from them. The plot of *Fleabag* feels so close to her life struggles, which magnifies her problems and anxiety for the future. It stressed her out and made her feel depressed, eventually motivating her to make deep reflections on her life.

Burdened by expectations from society and family in one’s education and achievement, participants expressed their willingness to break free from constraints, such as expressing one’s desires and exploring the many possibilities of life. Jinhe (25, Male) shared his reflections on

his own life after watching *Sherlock*, which inspired him to search for more personal freedom and to be open with others:

British TV dramas greatly impact me in terms of cognition and ways of looking at problems. For example, *Sherlock* has a more persistent, unconventional, and adventurous quality. I think this has a considerable impact on me. I don't know if you have ever gone to school in China before. After going to elementary and middle school in China, everyone has been cultivated to be less adventurous. I think I can feel the charm of an adventurous spirit from *Sherlock*, so now I am slowly beginning to be more open to communication with others and dare to explore the unknown world.

Jinhe (25, Male) is not the only one who felt this way; Gugu (20, Male) talked about how the dynamic changes of Sherlock Holmes helped him to open up and become a more outgoing person. The close connection Jinhe (25, Male) and Gugu (20, Male) had with the adventurous spirit of *Sherlock* says a lot about how they want to break free and find their true passions in life. To add to that, MC (22, Female) talked about being tired of having to achieve the high expectations of society and family and mentioned the lack of companionship in Chinese society towards people who cannot catch up. To the participants, one's imperfection in Chinese society is considered as not trying your best. MC (22, Female) talked about a BBC documentary, *Are Our Kids Tough Enough? Chinese School* (2015), which involved a social experiment exchanging five teachers between China and the UK to see whose teaching method was better:

What impressed me the most was this scene about a little chubby boy running 800 metres in PE class, a "unique" requirement in the Chinese examination system. He had some difficulties finishing the run, but there was no Chinese teacher to comfort him. However, his British PE teacher comforted him and said: "It's okay. Although you are not running fast enough, you are very good at math." This won't be acceptable in China. You are expected to be good at everything. It would be so good if someone could comfort you like what that teacher did from time to time.

The comforting words of the British teacher compares to what MC experienced in Chinese education system illustrate the emotional realism that she had from wanting to be understood. She shares the same struggles with the boy in the show, however, she has not gotten similar comfort as what the boy received in her own personal life.

The rising feminist consciousness and the embodiment of women rights advancement in British TV dramas works as a mirror to reflect on gender issues in China. By watching the hardships that women have endured in fighting for equal rights in the period dramas, Jinhe (25, Male) reflected on the declining status of women in China and all over the globe:

The history and stories in the film and television works are very contradictory scenarios to today's reality... Gender rights still have not improved much. We are still talking about wanting to be liberated. In reality, our current situation is going downhill or turning back to what we used to have. The status of women, in general, is declining again; women are again forced to bow to the patriarchal system. I cannot say this contradictory feeling has made me desperate but it did make me feel disappointed... Nowadays, capitalism is regaining its power in the name of the patriarchy. The tendency of women to be objectified, re-objectified, and repressed by patriarchy has become evident. The historical confinement of women shown in these films and television works has a relatively weak impact on the current capitalist environment... It is indeed clear to us that between the social issues of "class", "race" and "gender", the first two may have been resolved to some extent, but the issue of gender is like a wound that is getting bigger and bigger. In other words, we can feel that the gap between our popular culture and our social reality is not getting more and more closed, but more and more torn apart.

The feminism theme in *Downton Abbey* has evoked strong emotional responses from Jinhe on the current gender equality issues in China and the globe. He raises concerns about the current state of gender equality in China and considers it a regression to past oppressive patriarchal systems. This emotional realism shows the deep connection Jinhe has with the societal issues

represented in TV content, regardless of the cultural barriers. Such strong frustration triggered reinforces the role of media in facilitating emotional connection and reflection in media consumption.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the patterns that emerged from the interview data under three primary themes: textual appreciation, queer readings of British TV dramas, and aspirational meaning-making. Overall, the findings offer a deeper understanding of Chinese participants' engagement with British TV dramas with their lived experiences. The most frequently mentioned perceptions of British TV dramas by participants were "high quality", "strangeness", "rotten" (gay), and "relatable", reflecting its quality content (innovative content, choice of actors, acting, characterisation, gender roles, narrative, storytelling); country-specific content (accent, culture, humour, style, heritage, literature, history); queer reading; and resonance (addressing of societal issues, LGBTQ). These findings are consistent with data from previous studies (Zhu, 2014; Chi and Zhao, 2016; Zhao, 2016; Y.Q.Li, 2020), highlighting that the transnational appeals of British TV dramas to Chinese audiences lay in their high production quality, engagement with social issues, and country-specific content. The findings of this chapter suggest that British TV dramas are seen as carrying symbolic capital, as participants constantly praise them while pointing out the shortcoming of dramas from other countries. Thus, to consume British TV dramas is to adopt an identity that could potentially improve their social worth. More discussions on this topic follow in Chapter 6.

The findings from this study challenge the cultural proximity theory, which suggests that audiences prefer media content from their own linguistic and cultural backgrounds. While

participants found British TV dramas challenging to understand, these cultural discounts have become an attraction to accumulate cultural capital. The data reveals that Chinese participants are drawn to British TV dramas precisely due to their distinctly British content, style, language, and landscape. This echoes existing research on audience reception of Danish TV dramas (Esser, 2020), which argues that country-specific content contributes to the transnational appeal and authenticity of Danish TV dramas.

Unlike previous studies, this thesis indicates that participants are drawn to the social issues addressed in British TV dramas, such as gender roles and LGBTQ culture. In particular, this study fills the gap in studying the queer readings phenomenon of British TV dramas that previous studies have largely overlooked. It demonstrates how LGBTQ discussions sparked by viewing British TV dramas, particularly *Sherlock*, have cultivated greater acceptance of LGBTQ communities among some participants. The topics addressed in these dramas, and the discussions they triggered, hold particular significance for audiences who feel marginalised in society and burdened by societal and family expectations. The participants found the perceived emotional realism of British TV dramas authentic and relatable, fostering a sense of connection with the characters and narratives in British TV dramas.

Chapter 6: Cosmopolitans in a Censored World: Digital Mobility and Cultural Consumption

This chapter discusses the findings from the interview data to answer the second research question “How do Chinese audiences engage with the significance of British TV dramas?” and its sub-questions. The primary objective is to investigate in what way British TV dramas are perceived as symbolic capital for social distinction, and to understand the consumption and engagement with these dramas in the digital-media-restricted environment where the participants are situated. Based on the 28 interviews I conducted, several themes emerged regarding the popularity of British TV dramas in China and their engagement with this TV content. The following section focuses on these young cosmopolitans’ associations between their TV consumption of British TV dramas and everyday life navigation. I present the findings in three parts: cultural consumption as cosmopolitan capital; television taste as means of social distinction; and (transgressive) media consumption as a form of resistance towards state policy. I argue that participants television consumption is used as a means of cosmopolitan capital and social distinction. In particular, censorship was embraced by some digital savvy participants to further social distinction. It is also important to note that some of the participants were reluctant to answer questions about the use of VPNs to access foreign websites and illegal downloading TV programmes in China. More than half of the participants expressed their concerns when asked about the unpredictable state control of foreign cultural products. Thus the interview data should not always be taken at face value.

6.1 Cultural Consumption as Cosmopolitan Capital

British accent, culture, and TV dramas work as noble symbols of higher class and taste; to be cultivated with cultural knowledge of British TV dramas and a British accent is to adopt a representation of oneself as prestigious and sophisticated. Unlike Li's (2020) finding that Chinese audiences use American TV dramas mainly for entertainment. All respondents stated that entertainment and relaxation are some of the reasons why they watch British TV dramas; however, this point was frequently glossed over in their responses. Their consumption of British TV dramas also provides ways of gaining knowledge of social norms and values and perspectives that can be used as a resource in future global interactions. The online viewings, discussions, and self-education about social issues in British TV dramas are articulated in reflections on their own lives, enriching and reflecting their interests and values and striving for personal growth and development.

6.1.1 Imagined Britain

The global media flow through transnational TV and digital media platforms has offered people opportunities for an alternative worldview and lifestyles. This exposure has fostered a sense of cosmopolitanism among the participants, as they begin to identify with and aspire towards the values and lifestyles seen in British TV dramas. Many of them learned about Britain virtually by watching British TV dramas, which makes up for the inability to travel to and truly experience life in Britain. This cultural competency cultivated through the consumption of British TV dramas can be considered a form of cosmopolitan capital (Weenink, 2008; Igarashi and Saito, 2014; Lindell & Danielsson, 2017; Straubhaar & et al., 2022). This accumulated cosmopolitan capital enabled them to consider the society shown in British TV dramas as what their desired society should be, although these perceptions based on TV shows may not be

reflected in the real, lived experiences of (all) British people (McEwan & Sobre-Denton, 2011). Their imagined British society includes respect and inclusiveness for people of different sexual orientations and races, the pursuit of personal freedom, and compassion towards each other.

Furthermore, the fantasy of a diverse and inclusive modern society in Britain has caused self-reflexivity around personal desires and the unsolved problems Chinese society is currently facing. Based on MC's (22, Female) experience as someone who suffered from mental health issues and did not receive the help she needed as a young adult, she commented that the caring support for mental illness from the school and parents in *Skins* is the kind of society she longs for:

British society accepts and helps people with mental health issues with an open mind. People with mental health issues [in the series] have help coming from their family and the school. Anyone can have mental health problems regardless of which country you come from. In Britain, they can openly discuss it and seek help, but mental health has not been taken seriously in our country. You have to keep everything to yourself. Many do not know where to seek help.

Although, in reality, people in the West with mental health issues do not always receive as enough support as MC (22, Female) would imagine. While British TV dramas displayed British society as open and supportive towards mental health, the actual situation may vary. In this case, her understanding of Britain is influenced by the exposure to British TV dramas. As MC stated, stigmatisation over mental health is deeply rooted in Chinese society. She desires the perceived modern society represented in British TV dramas, where she can talk about her mental health issues without being ridiculed and despised.

Jiexi (22, Female) has gained most of her knowledge about Britain through watching British TV dramas, "My knowledge of Britain is mostly gained through British TV dramas. For

instance: British society, customs, traditions, history, political system and others. It makes me really interested in visiting Britain.” British TV dramas have given her a positive image of Britain and travelling to the UK has become one of her plans for the future.

British TV dramas have had a profound impact on Lan’s (24, Female) life. She decided to study theatre after becoming a fan of *Sherlock*. She has been to the UK multiple times for fan meet-ups and to watch plays. She likes to imagine living in the same city as Sherlock Holmes:

I think Britain is the best country in the world! [laughs] After my travels to the UK, I feel that if I have enough money, I really want to live there for a while... I like its inclusiveness, cultural diversity, and just Britain as a whole... I’m drawn to their etiquette, freedom, the privacy they give each other.

In Lan’s case, her exposure to *Sherlock* has shaped her life decision in what to study in university and her perception of Britain. The portrayal of British society in *Sherlock* has cultivated an idealised image of the country. Sharing similar opinions, Linyu (27, Male) talked about one of his favourite shows, *Vicious* (2013-2016), about an elderly gay couple’s love and hate relationship. “That is the kind of lifestyle I am yearning for. The open-minded social atmosphere and tolerant social cognition... is what we lack in China.” Although Britain is seen as a desirable country with perceived modernity, the data shows an individual’s path to modernity is closely related to class struggles. All participants stated that they now have a positive impression of the UK and would like to travel there, especially London. Although some have traveled to the UK for fan meet-ups and tourism such as Lan (24, Female), such practice is still regarded as elite activities in China, as they generally require significant economic capital. Such practices are especially difficult for participants from working-class families, “I would like to go to Britain! Especially London. However, it’s pretty much just a dream because I am just an ordinary person,” said Gugu (20, Male). Watching British TV dramas becomes a way to live through their cosmopolitan desires and lifestyles as global citizens.

6.1.2 Cultural Mark-up

Participants' statements reveal an evident accumulation of cosmopolitan capital about the British language (accents and expression) and culture (custom, history, literature). Existing studies have shown that many Chinese students have ill-informed interpretations of Western cultures and customs, which have resulted in unpleasant culture shocks when traveling or studying abroad (Wang, 2012). Moreover, obtaining a visa to travel and study abroad in Western countries is relatively challenging for many mainland Chinese, especially those without sufficient financial resources and a high level of English proficiency. Most of the participants have never been to the UK, thus they make up for their lack of opportunities to go abroad by watching British TV dramas to fulfill their curiosity about British cultures, values and literature. Therefore, the participants' use of British TV dramas for cultural cultivation can be seen as a form of virtual cosmopolitanism. They are able to engage with British cultures and develop a cosmopolitan outlook through their consumption of British content online.

English is the most popular foreign language to learn in China. English classes are provided in most academic units, from kindergartens to universities, with American English being the dominant style. Despite the popularity, Chinese people are often viewed as “deaf-and-dumb” learners with weak listening and speaking skills, lacking a language environment and chances to practice (Wang, 2012). Thus, learning English through English-speaking TV dramas is considered a self-directed way of learning (*ibid.*) and an economical and fun way to make up for the lack of English-speaking environments in everyday life. All the participants in this study learned English at school, however, with various proficiency levels of comprehension. Many participants said that they learned to adopt a “fancier” British English accent and British ways of expression through British TV dramas. Some participants rejected the “overly popular” American accent to adopt the British accent and ways of expression. As Rai (25, Female) said,

“The British accent feels very high-end. British TV dramas sounds more upscale than American TV dramas.” It is fair to say that British TV dramas carries symbolic meaning, and the perception of it reflects the distinguished taste of the participants. Learning British English through British TV dramas not only improves one’s English ability, but can also be regarded as a means to enhance one’s social attributes and status. Having certain levels of cultural capital thus works as a precondition to overcome difficulties in learning British accent in order to achieve a superior social and cultural status. It could be understood as a way to cultivate one’s cosmopolitan capital in order to benefit one’s position in a rapidly growing global China.

MC (22, Female) shared her experience of learning English through *Sherlock*: “I like *Sherlock*, and I became really passionate about learning English because of it; I want to learn their (British English) expressions.” Similar to her opinion, Xiaotong (30, Female) talked about how she used British TV dramas to adopt the British accent,

I love the accents in British TV dramas, and I make a conscious effort to correct my accent by watching British TV dramas.... I grew up learning American accents, and I’m just recently realising that British sounds amazing and want to learn it.

Similar to their opinion, many participants are well aware of the symbolic values British accents represent compared to the more widely spoken American accent. Learning to speak English with a British accent could in a way increase their cultural competency, therefore drawing distinction to their peers.

In addition to the language competency participants are acquiring through the consumption of British TV dramas, many participants consider British content to be excellent source material for understanding British history, culture and literature. “You will learn more things in the same 60 minutes watching British TV dramas than any other dramas”, said Lan (25, Female),

who is deeply attracted to the arts and history in British TV dramas. Their interests in British literature, culture, and TV dramas encouraged many to look up the cultural references and original books the dramas were based on to advance their knowledge of British culture and society. Such exploration and reflection on unknown cultures help to deepen their cultural competency of Britain. Rai (26, Female) praised the depiction of cultural and traditional details in British TV dramas. Although Rai has previously studied and lived in the UK, which made her better acquainted with British culture and history, she still discovers new things in *Downton Abbey*:

There was a scene where a maid asked the housekeeper why he irons the newspaper first thing in the morning every day. The housekeeper said something like, “you think the master is like you, who likes getting the ink on himself in the morning?” The note above the subtitles explained that he ironed the newspaper to make the ink evaporate faster. I looked it up online after; the upper class in Britain did use to have this habit.

Rai (26, Female) not only uses *Downton Abbey* to learn about etiquette and customs of the past but also as a way to deepen her understanding of the structured class society of Britain. Looking up cultural references online indicates her efforts to accumulate cultural capital about Britain. She investigated the traditions presented in the series herself and used it as a self-learning process to better her knowledge of British society. Similarly, Linyu (27, Male) also made an effort to learn the clothing and fashion style presented in *Downton Abbey*:

After watching *Downton Abbey*, I tried to find a pair of glasses of the so-called art deco style from the 20s to 30s. I would look up relevant information on the Internet related to the historical background of the series.

Historical and period dramas are often considered a form of entertainment, filling in knowledge gaps and gaining new insights into historical events. Although there have been debates about

the accuracy of *Downton Abbey* in the UK regarding its historical authenticity and language use, it seems that such accuracy is not the main concern for participants.

Watching British TV dramas was also seen as a fast gateway to learning about British literature. Banbu (24, Female) expressed her opinion on using *Sherlock* to study British literature and culture, “There are many intertextualities between the original Sherlock Holmes stories and the BBC one for people to explore, and many cultural metaphors that are worth digging. It is very interesting and very educational.” Similar to Banbau opinion, literature studies PhD student Wen Shi (26, Female) uses British TV dramas as a gateway to learning British literature and history.

British history is too complicated and difficult for me to understand. However, my professional background requires me to understand the historical background of Britain, so I usually learn by watching British TV dramas.

By exploring the intertextualities and metaphors in the dramas, and using British TV dramas as a learning tool, they are engaging themselves about British culture through the virtual world of TV dramas. This capability can be seen as a form of cosmopolitan capital, where participants have the capability to appreciate something from afar.

6.1.3 Criticisms

The appreciation of British TV dramas also has limits. Criticisms that emerged from interviews primarily focused on dating, sex, drug use, family relations, and interpersonal relationships, which participants have considered “cultural differences” and “cultural shock”. While they are intrigued by the freedom characters enjoy in British TV dramas, they still express rejection of such behaviours that are conflicting with their Chinese values. For instance, many participants

were amazed at the rebellious character of the young people in British TV dramas such as *Skins* and were envious of their carefree way of living. However, some found the values presented in the series conflicted with their traditional Chinese ways of living. “It is very messed up. I find it very hard to accept,” said Banbu (24, Female) about young people’s sexual relationships in *Skins*. Wuqi (30, Male) also shared how having such a relationship is understandable but, at the same time, very overwhelming for him, “When I was watching *Skins*, there were a bunch of kids fooling around in the series. In the beginning, I thought, Oh My God, people have so much freedom to do what they want in Britain. However, I think it is still a bit too much.” In traditional Chinese values, sex is still closely linked to one’s moral standard, character and responsibilities. It can be seen from the interviews that participants still hold conservative attitudes towards excessive sex or having multiple sex partners as shown in British TV dramas. Freedom of sex is not yet considered a way of expressing personal freedom. This cultural discount observed is not unique to the reception of British TV dramas in China. Similar findings can be found on the reception of American TV dramas in Asian countries show that audiences reject Western sexuality as it clashes with their traditional culture and values (Butcher, 2003; Kim, 2005).

Contrary to the perceived relatively tolerant and acceptive attitude toward the personal and medical use of soft drugs such as marijuana in British TV dramas, Chinese participants hold zero acceptance for it. Drugs like marijuana are regarded as extremely dangerous in China, and people who take drugs are often regarded as having a corrupt moral character. Several participants talked about drug use in dramas such as *Skins* being a cultural shock to them. Xiaotong (30, Female) shared her thoughts on drug use in British TV dramas:

We have stringent laws over drug use in China, and we have been educated since little that drugs are a very sinful thing. Very often, you see people using marijuana in British TV dramas, and this is something I find hard to accept.

It is evident participants encounter certain cultural discounts when engaging with British TV dramas. In Chinese society, drug dealing is treated as a severe crime and could lead to the death penalty. People who take drugs are generally stigmatised or considered dangerous. The interview data show that participants still hold strong opinions about drug use and consider the drug scenes in British TV dramas to be a “cultural difference” between the East and the West.

6.2 Television Taste as Means of Social Distinction

Participants’ preference for British TV dramas can be interpreted as using their taste for British content as a means to define their position in the social hierarchy. As Osburg (2013) argued that high socio-economic people in China seek symbolic badges as reputational currency and similar findings are found in this thesis (Chapters 2). While watching British TV dramas is not necessarily regarded as an upward social mobility driver, nor guaranteed to help the participants move further in their careers, it does provide them with a certain level of “cosmopolitan capital” to contribute to their social worth (Y.Q.Li, 2020; Ross, 2015). As the uneven distribution of social wealth and the increase of income polarisation has narrowed the upward channel (Chapter 1), cosmopolitan capital makes up for the lack of economic and social capital. The search for social markers becomes more evident when expressing attitudes towards media censorship towards foreign content in China, leading to polarised attitudes towards it. With more elite accessibility to cultural knowledge compared to their less-privileged peers (Wang, 2012), their ability to access censored information becomes a social indicator to differentiate themselves.

Several industry reports and existing studies suggest that the audiences of British TV dramas are technologically savvy and have the highest education and economic levels among all

audiences of TV dramas in China (EnfoDesk, 2013; Y.Q.Li, 2020; NetEase, 2013; Zhu, 2014). While the profile largely aligns with the participants of this study, some exceptions were noted. The research findings show that some participants come from working-class families in less-developed cities and smaller towns in China. These individuals did not benefit from parental wealth, nor have the opportunity to study abroad. They felt their exposure to foreign culture and television programmes came much later than those who grew up in mega-urban cities due to the more restricted flow of information in smaller cities/towns. Some had never been abroad and even exhibited a degree of self-effacement when articulating their aspirations concerning Britain, and seeing the opportunity to visit Britain as a “dream”. In addition, not all of them are language or tech-savvy users, as previous studies predict (Gao, 2016; Hsiao, 2014a). Most participants in this research specified that they need to rely on subtitles to understand British TV dramas due to insufficient English proficiency and unfamiliarity with British accents. Some have given up using VPNs due to language barriers and the technical issues caused by increasing censorship. Although all participants have some degree of digital mobility, such as owning digital devices and having access to the Internet. With constantly updated and unpredictable media policies, the ability to find banned TV content has become an even more severe dividing line between them. Despite these deviations, this study aligns with previous research, indicating that British TV dramas audiences in China are highly educated: all participants were either enrolled in a university or held university degrees. Considering that less than 4% of the population has a Bachelor’s degree (Yan, 2020), it becomes evident that their elite status should be evaluated not merely based on their social and economic capital, but should give significant weight to their cultural capital. This profile is also in line with existing research that suggests the cultural capital of China’s middle class mainly comes from their level of education and occupation (Zhang, 2020).

Many participants considered British TV dramas to be “strange” and “difficult to understand” due to their own lack of social and cultural awareness. Their unfamiliarity with the social and cultural nuances made casual viewing of British TV dramas challenging. This unfamiliarity and strangeness, in a way, add to its attraction for many. However, they learned to like it over time. As Jinhe (25, Male) said in the interview, “British TV drama is the kind of drama that is difficult to understand and enjoy at first, but once you fall into the hole of it, you can never get out.” In addition, the participants were also highly critical of TV dramas from China, US, Japan and Korea, as they lack a sense of depth that provoke thoughts and connects them with their lived experiences. Wen Shi (26, Female) said the complex plots and unfamiliar cultural and historical allusions of British TV dramas require her to use more brain work and energy than American and Korean TV dramas.

When I want to absorb something with depth, I will watch British TV dramas and programmes related to Britain; when I want to relax, I will choose Korean or American TV dramas. British TV dramas do not bring you straightforward happiness; it requires people to “use their brains”. Whether it is a joke or an ordinary historical and cultural novel, people need to really think about it with more emotional effort. When you watch American and Korean dramas, you can just HAHA about it, laugh out loud straight away without overthinking about it.

By expressing a preference for British TV dramas, which is perceived as requiring more cultural capital to decode, the participant distinguishes herself from those who prefer content with less depth and cultural discounts. Therefore, the ability to appreciate and decode British content is considered a form of cultural capital, which could further facilitate social distinction.

Shan Gao (30, Female) says Chinese TV dramas are terrible in quality compare to British ones despite not have watched many, “I didn’t know much about Chinese TV dramas, but I think the narrative is always really tacky and vulgar. Some of the dramas are SO bad, and they give

me goosebumps.” Such opinion has been quite common among several participants. Freshly graduated from a UK university, Rai (26, Female) moved from a remote part of Xinjiang province in the west part of China to Beijing. She considers British TV dramas to belong to an elite niche audience who has the cultural knowledge and learning ability, and are willing to “work for it” in order to understand it. Similar findings of considering British audiences belong to a niche community were also found in previous research (Zhu 2014).

I think American TV dramas want to attract more general audiences, and British TV dramas are more willing to attract people who want to understand their culture. The audience of British TV dramas [in China] is smaller and more limited... I don't really watch Japanese and Korean TV dramas now. I think they are quite brainless, to be honest. They like to celebrate the beauty of life, and it is too out of reality. We are all adults. Everyone should know what life is like. We know that life is beautiful, but we should also know that it can be awful.

Rai's statements about American, Chinese, Korean and Japanese content being easily accessible and “brainless” compare to British content are associated with what Bourdieu called “symbolic violence” (1984; Weininger, 2002). Some people despise others according to their preferences and aversions to cultural products to assert dominance and reinforce social hierarchies. By addressing Japanese and Korean dramas being “brainless” and “too out of reality”, the participant is devaluing the tastes of others who enjoy these contents. They are not able to see that the privilege of the global consciousness and cultural competency they have developed are highly based on their educational and social-economic capital (Jenkins, 2004).

More evidence of participants' practice of symbolic violence is observed in their attitudes toward media policy and censorship (Bourdieu, 1984; Weininger, 2002). Although the establishment of stricter media censorship and the Great Firewall of China has limited everyone's access to information, it is striking that many of the participants defended such

restrictions despite the inconvenience it brings to their less privileged peers. Some participants expressed their disappointment about the restricted media policy on foreign TV content; however, some rather see it as a personal inconvenience other than something that is inherently unreasonable. Yangtao (30, Male), who graduated from a UK university and now teaches English in an education agency, said that it has become problematic to access foreign TV content in China, but it could be for good reasons from the state's perspective.

I still find it a bit disappointing that many things are no longer accessible. I still wish these contents to be more tolerant in society. However, the state has its own considerations. After all, they hope that Chinese people have correct cultural guidance. That is the reason they made all these restrictions. But they should also consider whom they restrict it to.

Yangtao (30, Male) believes that the country's policy is there to guide people who lack sufficient judgment to establish correct values. However, as someone who received higher education abroad, he believes he should not be limited like his less-educated peers. Similar views that see people with lower cultural and economic status as others who cannot make judgments for themselves were found in several interviews. Like many other participants, Jiexi (22, Female) seems to enjoy the exclusive cultural tastes that she and like-minded people share. She said that she can understand the decisions to limit foreign information flows and foreign television content. She thinks the less-educated Chinese might not be able to fully understand foreign television content, so the openness of media freedom could result in more confusion and negative outcomes in society.

I can understand the reasons behind it [censorship], but it does affect me. I know very well that the overall level of education in our country is very low. We [as young university graduates] have "accidentally" stood at the top of the social and cultural ladder. Hundreds of cults may have been explicitly forbidden in our country... The number of people following these cults in rural areas is terrifying... In this case, a little bit of liberalization in film and television may lead to superstition, and the result will be very terrifying.

Unlike Yangtao, Jiexi (22, Female) said this with a trace of pride. She seems to be a loyal supporter of the state policies. She believes that the introduction of foreign culture into China without a filter may cause terrible consequences for other Chinese audiences with low education levels, which are likely to be eroded by foreign cultures and eventually leading these people astray. Allowing the Chinese to accept liberal ideas early may harm them because China is simply not ready yet. Different from her less-educated peers, she considers herself a university-educated person who has the ability to distinguish what is right and wrong.

The reform of the education system and the improvement of the people's education level is a very, very slow process. They have to ban it before people have the educational level to understand it. In particular, our education on LGBTQ topics has not been pushed forward. A considerable number of parents are opposed to schools' popularization of sex education among minors. If the restrictions on LGBTQ films and television works are released rashly, many minors will follow them. So, I understand the government's approach. However, as a university student myself with the ability to distinguish right from wrong, I definitely feel some discomfort because there is less and less content accessible. The only thing I can do is find more overseas dramas to watch and hope that this ban will be resolved as soon as possible.

In addition, she seemed to be very offended when I asked her, "Do you think the restriction of information has affected the reception and distribution of British TV dramas?" Even though she uses VPNs to seek information on banned websites, she disagrees that censorship has restricted information flow and even questioned how I came to this conclusion. She asked me, "I don't understand how your so-called restricted information can be proved?" The participant's reactions suggest a complex tension between her beliefs in the necessity of censorship and her personal desire for a more open social environment. As a highly educated individual, she finds the lack of content availability frustrating. This implies an underlying dissatisfaction with the existing media policies. However, her defensive reaction to the question

about information restriction indicates a denial of her privileged position within the system. Overall, her reaction provides an interesting perspective on how the intersection of education, applied practices, stated beliefs and state loyalty can shape individuals' perspectives on media consumption and censorship.

To Yangtao (30, Male) and Jiexi (22, Female), the arguably "harmful" content is more likely to affect their less privileged peers than themselves. As educated young cosmopolitans, they ignore the inequality in the economy and education in the Chinese community and consider the media restrictions to be for the "common good". It is safe to argue that the consumption of British television dramas is considered a taste symbol and a way to maintain social hierarchy. However, it is important to bear in mind that the participants might have concerns about criticising state policies, and they might also question my intention in conducting this research. Therefore, their comments cannot always be taken at face value.

6.3 Transgressive Media Consumption as a form of resistance

Connection with the global community

Having doubts and distrust towards the limited information provided about British TV dramas on Chinese social media platforms, some technology-savvy participants with good language skills use VPNs to keep up with information overseas. Similar to Hsiao's (2014a) findings, participants engage in transgressive practices in China as a form of resistance to state control of Western cultural products. The findings are also in line with previous studies that found Chinese audiences' television consumption has a close connection to the desire to keep up with world culture (Gao, 2016; Gao, 2019; Hsiao, 2014a; Jiang & Leung, 2012; Y.Q.Li, 2020; Wang, 2015). In this study, the participants are not only cultural brokers and tastemakers for foreign

audio-visual content in China, but they are also putting their efforts into building a connection with the global community. In doing so, their engagement with overseas fan communities provides them a platform to represent Chinese voices in global discussions. Their desire for increased communication between China and the rest of the world underscores the importance of bridging cultural divides between China and the global community.

The different volume of cultural capital and mobility leads to their different level of accessibility to the global community. The class habitus of the participants has equipped them with the skills and dispositions necessary to navigate the global digital environment, which can be leveraged to accumulate cosmopolitan capital. The findings of this study are in line with McEwan and Sobre-Denton's (2011) notion of "virtual cosmopolitans", suggesting that their digital mobility further advanced the formation of cosmopolitanism. The findings also share similarities with those of Lobato (2017) and Cruz (2008), who suggest that uneven digital mobility is closely related to class, education and technology competency. The participants are privileged for their technical ability, language skills, and learning capacity to bypass increasing technical obstacles to access foreign cultural products.

Participants' transgressive practices in gate-keeping the authenticity of the information about British TV dramas circulating in China aim to eliminate the gap between China and the outside world. Banbu (24, Female) and Momo (20, Female) said that they started to use VPNs to check what overseas fan discussions are like when they had doubts about the authenticity and possible misinterpretations of *Sherlock* news in China. They also felt the need to connect with overseas fandom since they noticed an absence of Chinese voices in global fan communities. Banbu (24, Female) expressed her desire for more communication between China and the rest of the world to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding:

I think [the communication between Chinese and oversea fans] is necessary. Because *Sherlock* is so popular in China and there are so many *Sherlock* fans here. However, it's very difficult for fans outside China to hear Chinese fans' opinions. China seems a bit mysterious to them. Last December most foreign fans thought *Sherlock* was banned in China. There were a lot of fans analysing *Sherlock*'s fourth season poster from Youku. They think the poster was authorized by the BBC, that it may include hidden clues for the new season. But for Chinese fans we all know it's a self-made poster by Youku for promoting *Sherlock* on their website. I told them not to take it seriously because they already started to write fan theories based on that poster. They think Youku is very interesting, because it can stream *Sherlock* almost synchronously as on the BBC, even though *Sherlock* is banned in China.

The ability to bypass the Great Firewall of China to accumulate foreign cultural knowledge is a privilege for the young educated cultural elites. Therefore, a certain level of digital mobility is the pre-conditioned cultural capital necessary to bypass censorship and maintain a connection with the global community is not something that everyone has or can access. It requires educational, linguistic, and technological skills and certain economic capital (Kaufmann, 2002; Lobato, 2017). As Momo (22, Female) said about her constant effort to connect to global fandom via a VPN, "I just want the world to hear about *Sherlock* Chinese fans' voice." Their ambition is fuelled by their desire to explore more diverse global cultural products and share their understandings with the world.

For Banbu (24, Female) and Momo (20, Female), participation in global fandom is very important, as it reassures them that the findings and discussions Chinese audiences have about British TV dramas are valuable. Banbu (24, Female) says she enjoys discussing and exchanging ideas with foreign fans about British TV drama:

Ever since I started to use a VPN to bypass the Great Firewall [laugh], I have been following overseas *Sherlock* fans' discussions. I admire them. And we sometimes interact. I think this kind of interaction is very good, it is a kind of cultural exchange.

Momo (20, Female) also expressed the same ideas:

I think overseas fans are very adorable; it's very fruitful to read and discuss fan theories with people from different cultural backgrounds, and it has opened up my horizons. It feels so good to know that people on the other side of the wall share similar understandings of the shows.

Some participants expressed their hesitancy and lack of courage about exchanging ideas due to low confidence in their language skills and long absence from global communities. Their lack of confidence in their cultural capital might prevent them from acquiring more cosmopolitan capital. Banbu (24, Female) said that her lack of confidence in her English skills has prevented her from participating in real discussions with overseas fan communities. Most of the time she only reads and retweets posts she finds interesting: "The fans on the foreign sites are so incredible, there is basically no research gap left for us to explore... foreign fans are so great, I think they are all so smart...I don't feel like saying anything in the foreign fan groups, I often only read what they say."

The participants' concerns about losing their connection to the world and losing the opportunity to be better known by the world were equally important. Such a tendency often results in belittlement in their imaginary stratification of global hierarchy. As much as participants want Chinese audiences' voices to be heard by foreign fans, they have acknowledged the possible gaps between themselves and the global fan base and consider themselves as the cultural "lower other". This uneasiness not only comes from a lack of confidence in language ability and lack of sources of information but also from a lack of comfort caused by the long absence of other Chinese audiences' voices on the global stage. It reflects that they are concerned about their global competence is gradually falling behind.

Actively seeking foreign content

These young cosmopolitan participants are not simply rejecting local media content as a means to distinguish themselves from their peers. Their constant efforts in seeking foreign cultural products that align with their cosmopolitan values show their fear of losing what they once enjoyed and identified with. These anxious feelings seem common among participants, as foreign habits, lifestyles, tastes, and cultural awareness they have cultivated are being affected by the ever-changing and unpredictable media policies. Furthermore, this ability to navigate online to seek banned information with the appropriate cultural knowledge needed to appreciate global culture indicates that they possess a significant amount of cultural capital. Their desires and motivations come not only from within but also from the context of their lived experience (Eichner, 2020).

These participants exhibit a strong desire to enrich their cultural knowledge and to strengthen and maintain their connection with the global community. In response to escalating media constraints, a number of participants refined their technical skills to explore alternative methods for maintaining global connections (Chapter 1). Their dissatisfaction with the current media policy and resistance to state-approved content underscores their cosmopolitan dispositions toward a more open global society. These tendencies are observed even among the “conservative” participants (see 6.2), who generally adhere to mainstream political values. These participants displayed discontent and resistance to the current media policy in the following ways: resistance to domestic TV content; rejection of official streaming websites and state-approved foreign TV content; utilisation of VPNs to access knowledge and information from foreign websites; and rejection of homogeneous social and media environment.

Rai (26, Female) expressed her opinions on the state policy on foreign content, “I would not want to be confined by the rules. It is my life, my choice.” Participants want to break free from social and media constraints and take control of their cultural consumption. It can be seen that their frequent references to rejecting censorship by not supporting state-approved content and streaming services carry civic values.

Affected by the previously mentioned changes in government policy in 2014 on foreign TV content (Chapter 1), fewer and fewer British TV dramas were available to be watched through legal channels. Participants indicate that British and American drama discussions and fan activities have gradually disappeared over the years, which they believe is due to the decreasing availability of TV content that can be received. For most participants born in the 1990s, foreign animation, film and TV dramas accompanied them through childhood and adolescence. The cultural products they consume have contributed to who they are and continue to offer meanings. They search for more foreign television to keep up with the lifestyles and knowledge they have adopted. Many people feel sad and helpless when they compare the programmes they watched growing up with those available under current media policy. Jia (25, Female) shared her concerns about the restricted information flows in China:

I think it is very sad, but there is not much we can do... There is an old saying in China: *He who has seen a great ocean is not easily content with a pond*. When you have seen things that are more diverse, you will not be content with the filtered and edited stuff they show you. This is not what I really want. I will find other ways, such as using a VPN, to look for what I want to know.

Expressing similar views to Jia (25, Female), MC (22, Female) thinks it is difficult to go back to a life with more restricted foreign media content:

I feel mad and angry, but I have no power to change it....Once you have tried delicious food, you would not be satisfied by food that tastes bad. Of course, you

might still eat it just to survive, but you will feel disgusted. As long as there is a way to eat the delicious food again, you will try to look for it.

Another participant expressed his/her anger:

Maybe we'll just move out of China or maybe there will be riots. We fight for our rights. Because we don't even have the rights to watch TV? That's ridiculous. I really don't think the government will or can dare to do this.

Many Chinese participants fill their global cultural cravings from foreign TV dramas through illegal means to continue their previous lifestyles. As one becomes increasingly deprived of people and environments where they can explore things outside of their frame of reference, the ability to respond is likely to become weaker. Jinhe's (25, Male) words summarize where most of the participants' worries come from and their constant effort to connect with the outside world:

You have to see the world before you can change the world. If your ability to even understand the world is weakened, or you do not have the chance to know the world, then not to mention to change the world or your own life.

To contribute even more to their anxiety towards the unstable media policy on foreign cultural products, Lan (24, Female) observed that the number of DVDs available for purchase was also decreasing day by day. She said in a worried tone that ways of watching foreign cultural products are narrowing:

I have been buying DVDs over the years, but I have noticed that the kinds that I could purchase are becoming more and more limited. Most of the ones I could find are those that have been imported to China. I used to be able to buy ones that are banned in China, but not anymore, in the recent two or three years. The whole industry is being watched by the authorities.

In response to the increasingly stringent controls, participants have come up with many countermeasures in the hopes of saving their favourite dramas for later viewing. MC (22,

Female) said that the current media policy has pushed her to save multiple copies on various drives as a coping strategy with an unstable future, “I have saved *Sherlock* everywhere, in my computer, on Baidu Cloud, other online clouds, and on my USB.” Purchasing physical copies of foreign TV dramas, seeking illegal content to download, and using VPNs to bypass firewalls are among the coping strategies participants adopted in preparation for an unpredictable future and possible new media policies. This ongoing resistance to mainstream media policy shows a desire to gain control of cultural products that continue to offer meanings to participants cultural needs.

Most of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the subtitles and content provided by streaming services, which makes them seek out pirated content provided by fan groups as a direct response to resisting official channels. Banbu (24, Female) criticised the Youku official translation as a direct word-for-word translation, with no explanation of cultural references. She referred to one translation mistake made in *Sherlock* by Youku, where they translated John Watson as a “confirmed bachelor” as he does not have a partner:

The term “confirmed bachelor” was used as a euphemism for homosexuals in the Victorian era. They wanted to imply this sub-text meaning in the series, but Youku’s translation just didn’t pick it up. So, the Chinese fans who watched the Youku version would not be able to get this meaning from the show.

This kind of translation fails to deliver key information and easily causes confusion about the plot. Subtitles generated by fan groups are generally perceived as better and include cultural references by participants, which is crucial in better appreciating British TV dramas.

The implementation of stricter censorship ensures that foreign content distributed online fills the cultural needs of Chinese audiences and aligns with China’s core socio-political values. Such action has led to streaming platforms conducting stricter self-censorship with highly

curated and often sterilised content. Many participants see HBO series *Games of Thrones* as a British TV drama due to the many British actors and British accents in the series. *Games of Thrones* was imported by SOHU TV and offered to subscribed users online. Wuqi (30, Male) used the show as an example of why he refused to use official streaming platforms to watch foreign TV dramas. Wuqi watched the first half of a downloaded episode from a pirate website with his friends and then continued to watch the second half when he got home from SOHU TV. And this is where the problem began:

I was discussing the second episode with my friend on the phone. I said I saw the “dragon mother” and the two dragons that were born in the fire. “No,” my friend said, “there were three dragons, not two.” “But I *only* saw two dragons!” So, I went back to find the original version and realised that there was *another* dragon next to her boobs, and that was why the third dragon was cut off from the scene. At that time, I decided I will *never* watch *Game of Thrones* on the official streaming service even though they bought this for a lot of money... the videos provided by subtitle groups make me feel better because there are no cuts. I prefer them the best.

This experience revealed the confusion of many participants as they expressed their willingness to pay subscription fees in order to support their favourite TV series. However, the excessive and unreasonable editing of the content by the streaming platforms often fails to provide them with a good viewing experience. MC (22, Female) has expressed her willingness to pay for licensed British TV dramas, if the unedited version exists.

Watching a pirated version would not be able to bring revenue and viewership to the TV drama. I feel uncomfortable watching pirated versions. When I was a student, I couldn't afford to spend money on licensed content, but now I could, I felt that I have to find the ones with copyrights to watch within the limits of what I could afford. I will pay for the subscriptions if there is a platform to watch the licensed version. That way you can watch it proudly and peacefully. Because you have contributed to its viewership and market revenue. If Chinese fans have no legal channels to see British TV dramas, or can only continue watching pirated

versions, these production companies will generate no revenue from us, and will eventually stop developing Chinese market.

Torn between what she “wants to do” and what she “can do”, MC (22, Female) expressed her guilt and disappointment at not being able to contribute to the viewership of some of her favourite British TV dramas. This kind of helplessness and entanglement came up frequently in the interviews. With similar concerns as MC (22, Female), Linyu (27, Male) talked about the dilemma he and his fellow young Chinese are dealing with in-between self-pleasure and complying with the law.

We can't find a legit channel to watch them [British TV dramas]. The ones we can watch through official channels are either filtered or cut. It is a very confusing time for us, you can only watch more diverse products through piracy channels, but if you do that, the country has a more legitimate reason to condemn your behaviour. These national regulatory authorities cannot provide a reasonable channel or to let go of this restriction. They are hoping to reduce the impact of the entire Western world, or the Anglo-American TV on Chinese audiences. Because more or less this kind of drama will definitely have a certain impact on the audiences.

It has become clear that participants consume British TV dramas from pirate websites both as a coping strategy to state policy, also as a form of resistance to media censorship for AV content. Despite their willingness to support licensed content, they felt forced to walk between the grey lines to consume pirated British content that resonate with their values, lifestyles and cultural needs.

6.4 Conclusion

The results of this chapter suggest that there is an association between state media policy, digital mobility, social stratification, and the reception of British TV dramas in China. These

well-educated young Chinese participants who developed a shared taste for British television dramas have immersed themselves in the imaginary world of British TV, in its lifestyles, cultures and literature. Especially for those who lack the mobility to travel out of China, British TV dramas provide a window into a world that was virtually unfamiliar to them.

British TV dramas provide novel symbolic materials that trigger Chinese participants' reflexivity on what could be their desired modern life. The participants all yearn for a more inclusive and liberal society where individuals' desires are respected, and differences are embraced. Many participants consider Britain to be a desirable society that they would love to visit in the future. They watch British TV dramas to learn about the cultural knowledge of another country and maintain a close connection with the global community. With different levels of digital mobility, the restrictive Chinese media controls to limit the impact of the West and retain social control have prevented many people from accessing more diverse foreign TV dramas. Participants' resistance to current media regulations and censorship shows their determination to seek out what they once had and to enjoy products that continue to offer meaning to their lifestyles.

This finding also adds to Bourdieu's (1984) concept of taste and cultural capital from a Chinese perspective. It highlights the role of digital mobility as a crucial factor in advancing one's cultural knowledge and social status in the social-political context of China. The findings reveal two interesting patterns among participants: one yearning for an open society that allows more accessible information for all; another practice involves symbolic violence towards less-educated and peers who do not have the cultural and digital ability to access banned foreign TV dramas and their perceived "liberal" values and beliefs (Bourdieu, 1984; Weininger, 2002). The practice of symbolic violence is also observed in the findings (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986; Ross,

2015; Gao, 2016). These findings indicate that censorship and digital mobility have further distinguished social class in China. Elites embrace censorship and the information gap to maintain their own social status. Thus, digital mobility, cosmopolitan capital and taste hierarchy are used as a means of social distinction to differentiate themselves from their peers who have less cultural-digital ability.

The appearance of the taste hierarchy of foreign television dramas represents the elites' knowledge of a diverse variety of cultural repertoires that can be exploited to differentiate themselves. Therefore, I argue that the consumption of British TV drama should be understood against the backdrop of China's increasing media censorship and class aspiration. Young, educated Chinese wish to accumulate cosmopolitan cultural capital to enhance their status in China's rising globalising society (G.C.Li, 2020). The ability to decode British TV dramas and bypass censorship online is used as a cultural marker and cosmopolitan capital to transcend the local others (Bourdieu, 1984; McEwan & Sobre-Denton, 2011; Lobato, 2017).

British TV dramas are far more than a source of entertainment but rather a toolkit to accumulate cosmopolitan capital and reflection on societal issues largely absent from mainstream discourse in China. These participants demonstrated a notable desire for cosmopolitanism and a freer society, motivated by their willingness to enhance their cultural capital and maintain their global ties. However, the discontent they have with the ever-rising media restrictions triggered resistance towards state-approved content and the channels to access them. Therefore, I propose their transgressive actions and attitudes towards state-controlled cultural products carry civic values, and can potentially lead to increased engagement in political dialogues on public issues in the future.

Chapter 7: Discussion

This study set out to examine the reasons behind the popularity of British TV drama in China and how Chinese audiences engage with the significance of it. The reception of these dramas has been shaped by the varying volumes of cultural capital, and the digital mobility of individuals, under the restrictions imposed by the media policy. Overall, the findings suggest that British TV dramas serve as a medium of entertainment, a source of cultural capital, a vehicle for self-identification, a window to the global stage, a symbol of resistance, and potentially a platform for civic engagement.

Previous studies on British TV drama in China have focused on the fandom, online phenomena, production, distribution, reception, and heritage aspects (Mao, 2019; Zhu, 2014; Zhang, 2017; Chi & Zhao, 2016; Zhao, 2016; Y.Q.Li, 2020; Zheng, 2023). While this study examines the transnational appeal of British TV dramas and the audience's engagement with the TV content, it also shines a light on several perspectives that are largely overlooked in previous studies. For instance, it fills the gap in the interpretation of queer readings of British TV dramas and highlights the significance of digital mobility in information-restricted Chinese society. Additionally, this study examined Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, cosmopolitanism, and cultivation theory in the social-political context of Chinese society, particularly in regard to the information restraints imposed on foreign media content. Moving on to the next sections, this chapter discusses the main findings of the research, implications, and contributions in the light of theoretical engagement and previous research. The study's limitations and recommendations are discussed in the final section.

7.1 Discussion of Main Findings

High Production Values

The study findings demonstrate that British TV dramas are acclaimed for their high production values in terms of their textual perspectives, emotional realism, and address of social issues. These high production values are associated with what participants considered as the “British style” that manifests in its visual aesthetics, carefully constructed episodes, innovation, narratives, character portrayals, acting, culturally inspired content, language, and depictions of tradition and historical events.

Notably, participants often use the term “subtle” to describe the British approach to acting and representation of same-sex relationships (see 5.1.1). This subtlety is evident in the detail-orientated videography, minimalistic facial and bodily expressions that convey complex emotions, and an ordinary depiction of same-sex relationships and sexual minorities. This unique perception of British TV dramas is identified distinctly as British, setting it apart from American and other Asian content.

Furthermore, the perceived quality of British TV dramas also lies in their engagement with societal issues that are largely missing from public discourse and TV output in China (see 5.3). Despite Britain being geo-culturally removed from China, participants found that British TV dramas offered them something to identify with on a deeper level. This emotional realism, which triggers reflection and critical thinking, contributes to what participants consider as high production values and quality content. Particularly, participants praised the manner in which the dramas address topics that relate to real-life challenges, including gender equality, mental health issues, family and societal expectations, and identity politics. The participants’

interpretations of the values, beliefs and cultural implications from these dramas are reflexive and critical, especially when confronted with their old belief systems and values.

Participants' reception of the quality content is highly bound to everyday realities, cultural awareness, and social background (Cardwell, 2007; Feuer, 2007). For instance, making comparisons with the feminist consciousness of *Downton Abbey* and the patriarchal system in China; associating *Fleabag* with the loneliness and hardship of working in the big city; wishing that mental illness could receive the same attention and help as people did in *Skins*; wishing to break away from traditional thinking and social constraints to go on adventures like in *Sherlock* (Chapter 5). However, while embracing British values and culture, these participants also critically evaluate TV content concerning their own cultural traditions and social context. Criticisms have been observed among participants around the glorification of sex and weakening societal responsibility around drug use in British TV dramas, as they contradict their traditional Chinese values and beliefs. Therefore, this reinforces the importance of studying the perception of quality in the situated context of the viewer's life experience, social context, and political stance (Cardwell, 2007; Feuer, 2007).

Britain as Queer Symbol

The LGBTQ discussions triggered by British TV dramas carry aspirational civic values, as they enabled audiences to question set gender roles and negotiate with their own sexuality. They have considerably fulfilled what was missing from domestic TV and films, highlighting the lack of critical discourse and education on sexual freedom and identity politics within Chinese society. First, it promotes awareness of LGBTQ culture for a broader range of young audiences and potentially improves wider social acceptance of the gay community in China (Chapter 4). Chinese participants' ridicule and mockery of the LGBTQ element in British TV dramas can

be seen as a process of de-sensitisation of sexual-minority topics that are traditionally seen as taboo (Chapter 5). Although the ridiculing of “gayness” and “rotteness” could be seen as a way of promoting awareness among the public at the expense of LGBTQ communities, it offers opportunities to broach the subject of the “love that dare not speak its name”. As Giddens (1991, p.71) argued “awareness creates potential change, and may actually induce change in and through itself.” This potentially paves the way for a more inclusive environment for LGBTQ communities in China; second, it provides cultural material for Chinese LGBTQ communities to identify with, especially for those who are negotiating their sexuality (see 5.3.1). Finally, the connection between fictional characters and real-world matters would potentially lead to increased political agency and dialogues on LGBTQ culture in China (Jenkins, 2015). For instance, Wuqi expressed a sense of empowerment after watching the tragic narrative of the gay character from *In the Flesh*. This experience motivated him to confront the injustices faced by sexual minorities in China (see 5.3.1).

To participants Chenai (18, Female) and Wuqi (30, Male), who are part of the LGBTQ community, the queer readings and addresses of LGBTQ elements in British TV dramas provided materials for them to identify with and reflect on (See 5.3.1). Frustrated with the paucity of social topics being addressed in domestic TV dramas, they seek content and representations they can identify with from British TV dramas. However, the findings of this study challenge Cohen and Weimann’s (2000) argument that teenagers from religious homes are difficult to cultivate by the values and beliefs found on TV shows. Chenai (18, Female), who is from a very religious Christian household, takes values from the TV show that contradict her religious beliefs to confront, negotiate and understand her identity as a sexual minority. Her slash fan fiction writing and involvement in organising slash-themed events are all parts of her journey to make sense of her identity. According to Li’s (2009) findings,

Chinese female slash fans tend to distinguish between their real lives and fantasies due to self-censorship. Similar behaviour was observed in Chenai (18, Female) in her first interview, in which she once showed very distinguished behaviour: a passion for slash culture and a real-life homophobic attitude. Studying Chenai's (18, Female) media engagement adds another explanation to Li's (2009) and Cohen and Weimann's (2000) finding, as insecurities about exposing one's own sexual identity, family relations, religion, personal beliefs, and society in which one's life is situated can contribute to such contradictions. It further reinforces the importance of examining media reception in one's social context and life experiences.

Taste Hierarchy and Cosmopolitan Capital

Television taste as means of social distinction is observed in this study (Jiang & Leung 2012; Zhu 2014; Gao 2016; G.C.Li, 2020). British TV dramas, which are perceived as nobility, heritage, literature, and quality, occupy a dominant role in the hierarchy of cultural taste among participants. Similar to the observation of the critical relationship between cultural consumption and social status in China (Osburg, 2003; Ross, 2015; Gao, 2016; Li, 2020; Zhang, 2020), British TV dramas have become reputational badges of high aesthetic taste, enabling participants to differentiate themselves from others and thereby reinforcing divisions in cultural capital and social status. These observations align with Zhu's (2014) research, which suggests viewers of British TV dramas consider themselves to be niche audiences. The use of contrasting terms such as "sophisticated", and "noble" versus "brainless", and "tacky" to compare TV content implies a pre-existing stratification in cultural capital and social status. This could originate from notions previously propagated by industry insiders and commentators (Chapter 4), or an inherent hierarchy acknowledged by the participants. The initial challenges presented by these dramas have become points of interest over time, serving as status indicators. Thus, the consumption of British TV dramas acts as a social marker,

enabling participants to distinguish themselves from those without similar tastes, reinforcing their social status, and securing their membership in the “elite club”.

The practice of “symbolic violence” is also observed in several participants’ attitudes towards tastes, cultural capital, and the digital mobility of the less-capable others (Bourdieu, 1984; Weininger, 2002). For instance, their pronounced distaste for TV dramas from America and other Asian countries symbolically marginalises the tastes of others. This is especially obvious among some participants when they display their dissatisfaction with dramas from Asian countries such as China, Korea, and Japan. TV dramas from Asia have been described as “brainless”, “tacky” and “out of touch with real life”, whereas American TV dramas have been described as “commercial”, “watch it to relax”, “bring you very straightforward happiness (in comparison with British humour). This suggests that the appreciation towards cultural products from Western developed countries still exists in China. (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999; Elliott et al., 2018; Li, 2020).

Furthermore, British TV drama is far more than entertainment, it becomes a tool for participants to learn about British culture, literature, customs, and language, this is especially significant for participants who lack the economic means to travel abroad. British TV dramas have cultivated among these audiences a perception of Britain as their ideal society, where it respects individualism, personal freedom, and a strong sense of compassion for each other. However, this perception does not always mirror the real British society, but an imagined one through their consumption of television dramas. This echo previous research on cultivation theory and virtual mobility that television content and the Internet can produce an artificial reality that seems increasingly real to audience who lacks direct contact with many real-world issues (Hawkins & Pingree, 1980, 1981; Shrum, 2001; Shrum & Bischak, 2001; Petzold, 2017).

The idea of a diverse and accepting society has triggered thoughts among participants about visiting Britain or making life changes according to their newly accumulated habits and cosmopolitan values (Chapter 6). It is through this constant exploration of social forms and self-cognition that liberating ideas and means of freedom and modernity can be seen to be brewing among Chinese audiences.

Similar to G.C.Li's (2020) and Ross' (2015) studies of emerging cultural capital in China, the data reveals that the privileged are the first to embrace foreign culture, resulting in a social distinction being drawn. The young, educated participants who are bilingual and technologically savvy have more accessibility to foreign audio-visual programmes. The cultural capital cultivated through the consumption of British television content can be identified as a form of cosmopolitan capital (Weenink, 2008; Igarashi and Saito, 2014; Lindell & Danielsson, 2017; Straubhaar & et al., 2022). It helps to increase their international competencies to further distinguish themselves from the underprivileged others. This suggests a reciprocal relationship where their digital mobility and cultural capital not only facilitated the formation of cosmopolitanism but are in return, reinforced by it. This creates a cycle where cultural capital and digital mobility mutually empower each other, shaping the cosmopolitan identities of these young elites.

Resistance and Tension

Furthermore, the complexity of media consumption in China should not only be considered as a copyright or piracy infringement but rather a collective resistance to state-regulated media content and willingness to participate in world culture. The cosmopolitan disposition of these Chinese participants has motivated participants to continue exploring more foreign cultural content, which in a way motivates them to challenge state policy to seek information from

oversea platforms. They see their action as a form of resistance towards state-proofed AV content, streaming platforms, and overall restricted media environments. Their motivation to seek foreign media and engage with global culture is accompanied by a sense of unease about the unpredictable future of state media policy and censorship. They are concerned about the continuous disappearance of information sources, fearing that this might lead to a loss of connection with the global community. As seen in 6.3, participants expressed their frustration in having limited access to foreign content in China. Watching British TV dramas, especially through pirate channels, is their way of resisting state media policies and strengthening ties to global communities. They refuse to be subjected to strict media regulations, and an orthodox social atmosphere.

This study also unveils unexpected contrasting perspectives on censorship and media policies on foreign cultural products, which run counter to previous findings (Hsiao, 2014a, 2014b). Specifically, both resistance to and support of censorship and restricted media policies are observed in the findings. Among the two views, one group advocates a more egalitarian media environment, while the other expresses an understanding of these policies, as they are less affected by them due to their higher level of cultural capital and digital mobility. They appear to discredit the less-educated and less digital-abled “others” to justify censorship of foreign AV content. Such behaviour can be explained by Bourdieu’s symbolic violence (1984; Weininger, 2002), which indicates that the dominant class despises others according to their preferences and aversions to cultural products to assert dominance and reinforce social hierarchies. The disparities in cultural taste indicate underlying cultural and perception divides in Chinese society. The defensive attitude towards censorship and judgment of taste by the privileged to maintain the social distinction from the underclass echoes previous literature

suggests that the stigmatisation of the lower class exists in Chinese society (Weber, 1978; Kuang & Liu, 2012; Li, 2014; G.C.Li, 2020).

It is evident that these pro-censorship attitudes come from elite needs for social distinction. Their pro-censorship opinions challenge previous studies on censorship and the third-person effect that people from more collective-minded societies like Asia are more likely to follow government policy and have pro-censorship opinions (Feng & Guo, 2012; Lee & Tamborini, 2005). Instead, the findings of this thesis are more cohesively demonstrated through the lens of “symbolic violence”, highlighting the connection to education, digital mobility and inequality in cultural and economic capital. The young, educated Chinese who are bilingual and technologically savvy have more accessibility to foreign audio-visual programmes, and are less affected by restricted media policy and censorship. The restricted information flow creates an information gap that benefits them in drawing boundaries with their less-educated peers. As Kuipers (2006) argued, taste is a form of cultural knowledge that plays a crucial role in maintaining taste hierarchies. Knowledge always comes before appreciation: you must be aware of something before setting preferences on it. The digital ability to access more diverse AV programmes and foreign platforms is thus helped accumulate cultural capital that can be used for upward social mobility.

7.2 Implications and Contributions

This study proposes that cultural capital, cultural consumption, and digital mobility are closely intertwined and interconnected in transnational TV drama reception. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1984) cultural capital theory within China’s social-political context, this study provides a fresh lens through which to examine distinction - the significance of digital mobility in information-

restricted China's society. This often-overlooked research topic reveals how various volumes of cultural capital and digital mobility, could access varying amount of information within and outside of China, which in turn shapes taste and cosmopolitan capital, and further reinforces social distinction. In this framework, digital mobility emerges as a crucial tool for accumulating cosmopolitan capital in China, a necessity in a landscape where censorship and internet restrictions have created clear divisions between individuals with different volumes of cultural capital. The findings reflect the observations made by Cruz (2008) and Lobato (2017), who propose that disparities in digital mobility are linked to factors such as class, education and proficiency in technology. The participants of this study possess pre-engaged cultural capital, technical ability, language skills, and learning capacity needed to overcome growing technical barriers in accessing foreign cultural products. Their experiences add practical insights to the theoretical exploration of how digital mobility contributes to class formation and distinction in Chinese society.

This study aligns with previous research, suggesting that people with high socio-economic in China seek symbolic badges as reputational currency for identity construction (Osburg, 2013; Ross, 2015; Gao, 2016; G.C.Li, 2020; Zhang, 2020). It supports the correlation between cultural consumption, cosmopolitanism and social status in China, a problem deeply rooted in the imbalance of social and economic resources that are unevenly distributed. This research further confirms existing studies that suggest cosmopolitanism should be studied in the local context, as Chinese elites adopt cosmopolitan capital to transcend others for social distinction (Friedman, 2000; Delanty, 2006).

This study also contributes to the cosmopolitanism studies in geo-political regions. The unexpected result from the participants with pro-censorship attitudes while engaging in

transgressive practices indicates that censorship was embraced by elites to further social distinction. These cosmopolitan elites are struggling with the tension between their desires and their belief systems within the nation-state. While they are reaching out to the global society, they are also guarding the stated beliefs in state policies, which was the initial cause of their illegal behaviour.

This study contributes to the scholarship of transnational TV studies by investigating a largely underexplored area: the reception of British TV dramas in China. By building upon previous studies on how transnational TV dramas offer meaning to audiences from different social and cultural backgrounds (Ang, 1982; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Mikos, 2007; Barker and Mathijs, 2008; Eicher, 2020; Esser, 2020; Jensen & McCutcheon, 2020), the findings of this study challenge several existing theories. Specifically, the findings challenge Straubhaar and La Palestina's (2007) cultural proximity theory, demonstrating that participants connect to British TV dramas based on their living experiences and the social-political context in which they are situated instead of cultural proximity. For instance, participants were attracted to topics in British TV dramas that are largely absent from domestic TV content and public discourse. Furthermore, this study challenges the cultural discount theory (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988), adding to the growing evidence that country-specific content, language, and cultural identity are precisely what contributed to the popularity of British TV dramas in China (Esser, 2020). This "strangeness", or distinctiveness, adds to the authenticity of British TV drama, setting it apart from the content of other countries.

This study further contributes to the field by exploring queer readings of British TV drama and their implications for general audiences and sexual minorities in China, which is a largely underexamined area (Zhu, 2014; Chi & Zhao, 2016; Y.G.Li, 2020). This study is, to date, the

only study that examines the queer readings of British TV dramas among sexual minorities in China. This collective movement of queer culture could translate into what Fiske (1992) called a “sense of solidarity” and “shared resistance” against mainstream sexual politics, hegemonic masculinity, and cultural homogeneity in Chinese society. It further suggests these discourses may foster aspirational civic values among participants, potentially leading to increased political agency.

The discussions of LGBTQ culture associated in relation to British TV dramas reflect shifting gender roles in Chinese society. Many participants have noticed a growing acceptance and positive change in attitudes towards LGBTQ communities after consuming British TV dramas and engaging in relevant discussions on online platforms. This observation aligns with existing studies on cultivation theory (Walters, 1994; Riggle et al., 1996; Feng & Luo, 2022), which demonstrate that audiences tend to exhibit more positive and tolerant attitudes toward LGBTQ communities when exposed to dramas featuring same-sex relationship, especially if media portrays them in distressing situations or as prominent figure.

Although the interview data is highly focused on participants’ interpretation of *Sherlock*, it is evident that they associate the image of “queer” with Britain instead of *Sherlock* alone (Chapter 5). The mediascape of British TV dramas indicates the significant role these dramas play in shaping the collective imaginary national image of Britain. The ever-rising feminist consciousness has given participants the strength to express their appreciation for good-looking male characters and to have erotic fantasies about them (Han, 2014). Chinese participants devoted to queer readings of British TV dramas are remarkable for the social-political context in which they are situated: websites devoted to slash fanfiction are often censored and regulated;

people who write slash fan fiction and profit from it are often considered pornographers and risk facing legal consequences (Hampton, 2015).

Theoretically, this study enriches digital ethnography methodology by introducing new insights for conducting research within an information-restricted social environment. It sheds light on the obstacles researchers may encounter when conducting studies in China that touch on sensitive fields. For instance, despite the lack of data from expert interviews due to their reluctance to share opinions openly, I instead used their data as valuable background knowledge to construct my research questions. Face-to-face interviews with participants must be considered when discussing sensitive topics due to a lack of trust among people and fear of providing criticisms that could be traced. In the end, the strength of the study lies in the high rate of follow-up interviews. Several participants had a second interview a year after the first one to check for more insights into their perspectives towards British TV dramas and media policies.

Finally, this study contributes to the industry in several different ways. Firstly, it provides insights into the ways viewers in China may interpret and respond to British content. This can help distributors and production companies in tailoring their products to appeal to viewers within China. Secondly, it helps the industry better understand and target different socio-economic groups in China, which could be crucial for marketing and advertising strategies. Thirdly, the findings could also be valuable to policymakers in the UK, helping them to understand the cultural, social, and political implications of foreign media consumption in China. This could lead to more informed policy negotiation in exporting cultural products into Chinese market. Fourth, it provides insights to media companies to understand the potential challenges that might be applicable to other markets with strict censorship and media policies.

7.3 Limitations and Future Research

The limited sample size restricted the generalisability of the study's results. With only 28 interviews conducted, the data collected primarily represent an audience of British TV dramas, and therefore, may not fully represent the wider general audience. Additionally, issues of selection bias emerged during participant recruitment for this study. There was no predetermined gender ratio when recruitment began online. However, it became apparent that most of the participants identified as female. In a later phase, the recruitment strategy shifted to a snowballing method, largely drawing on recommendations from previously interviewed participants or personal contacts in the cities visited during my field trip in China—namely Beijing, Shanghai, and Shijiazhuang. While this approach might introduce selection bias, it was a considered decision, given the challenges of discussing sensitive topics with participants recruited earlier online. Establishing a connection through mutual acquaintances was thought to foster greater trust, potentially facilitating more candid conversations about their experiences and views on consuming foreign cultural products in light of the existing media policy.

As mentioned before, participants' opinions about censorship and state policies should not always be taken at face value. Given the potential concerns they may have about discussing pirate viewing of foreign TV dramas and the possible mistrust they have towards me as a researcher, these factors might have influenced the findings. Similar challenges were also faced while conducting interviews with individuals in the Chinese media industry, particularly those working as buyers and operators for streaming service platforms. Most preferred not to have their identities and conversations disclosed. Consequently, the interviews conducted with them were only used as contextual knowledge to help form the interview questions and navigate the research.

What makes this research more difficult to follow up on is the ever-changing media policies prior to the submission of this thesis and beyond. The data collection of this study was completed in 2018. Subsequent to that time, several events have occurred including the closure of the subtitle group YYeTs (Chapter 1). Therefore, the ways to access foreign content have become even narrower since then. As media policies are rapidly changing and difficult to predict, I've decided to use the already collected data in the context of media policies released until 2018. The changing policies could potentially have long-term effects on audiences in China. Therefore, more research is needed to address the following perspectives: First, the ways in which audiences in China may use various strategies to adapt to shifting state policies regarding transgressive media consumption should be more thoroughly investigated. Second, media policy towards foreign cultural goods and the long-term societal impact in China call for a more comprehensive examination. In particular, it would be interesting to examine whether there is a cultural gap between the post-1980s generation, who grew up watching diverse foreign TV programmes, and the post-2000s generation, who grew up in a more media-intensive but censored environment. Overall, the guerrilla war between the Chinese audiences and the rising restrictions of media policies should be expected for a long time to come; thus, further research is needed to shed light on the long-term impact this might have on the TV industries of China.

Conclusion

This thesis investigated the reasons behind the popularity of British TV dramas and how Chinese audiences make sense of the significance of the British content they consume. It further discussed in what way British TV dramas are seen as symbolic capital; audiences' reflection on transgressive practices; and whether the engagement with British TV dramas carry civic values. A total of 28 interviews were conducted with Chinese participants aged between 18 and 33 years old. The participants of British TV dramas are young and educated elites with a cosmopolitan outlook who are eager to learn about foreign cultures. The study employs Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and distinction, cosmopolitanism, and cultivation theory to examine participants' interpretations and negotiation of British TV dramas within China's social-political context. The findings of this study suggest that Chinese participants consume British TV dramas to embrace world cultures, and oppositional values, articulate resistance and challenge forms of media censorship. British TV dramas provide missing parts of their media needs to negotiate the micro-political struggles of daily life.

Chapter 5 answers research question one "What are the reasons behind the popularity of British television dramas among Chinese audiences?". The findings show that British TV dramas are well-received for their high production values which are reflected in the aesthetic, portrayal of characters, acting, professionalism, presentation of heritage, innovative narratives, and complex storytelling. The British-specific content including the language, refinement of culture and historical events, literature, British landscape and cityscape (Chapter 5) did not produce cultural discount, instead, add to the transnational appeals of British TV dramas. In particular, British TV dramas are perceived to offer a more realistic and authentic portrayal of societal issues, especially those often absent from public discourse and TV output in China. Thematic proximity such as gender roles, mental health issues, family and social expectations,

and sexual identity has been observed as they were frequently mentioned as reasons to engage with British content. The exquisite customs and refined lifestyle that is often displayed in period dramas such as *Downton Abbey*, are frequently praised as the embodiment of British “quality” and “style”. These dramas appear to provide a unique viewing experience that resonates with participants in pursuits of culturally inspired and sophisticated narratives.

Although British TV dramas might not symbolise queer culture in the West, they acquired new local value and significance when adopted by Chinese audiences. The queer association has made Britain and British TV dramas a queer symbol in China. The rising popularity of queer readings in British TV dramas shows significant value to LGBTQ participants in terms of personal identification, companionship, and empowerment. It also provides a platform to discuss topics that seem taboo in Chinese society and cultivated participants’ awareness about LGBTQ communities. Reading and discussing LGBTQ culture has allowed participants to work on societal issues and reflect on misogyny and homophobia. Such discussions and “thought-provoking” queer readings encourage the reinterpretation of cultural norms regarding politics of sexuality, identities and the social construction of gender, leading to subversion and resistance to homogeneous societal cultures.

Chapter 6 answers research question two “How do Chinese audiences engage with the significance of British TV dramas” and its sub-questions. The findings show that British TV dramas provide cultural material that aligns with participants’ growing needs for personal development and identification, social symbols, and maintaining connections with a rapidly growing global culture. The taste for British TV dramas is seen as a form of cultural capital that can be used for social distinction.

Transnational television and digital media platforms have opened up possibilities to access varying perspectives and global lifestyles. This access provides individuals the chance to gain a broader understanding of the world. British TV dramas present alternative modernity that participants are yearning for. They show them a more inclusive and freer social environment where individualism is encouraged, and social issues are constantly confronted. Participants want to live in a society that focuses less on competition and more on individual preferences, where each individual's differences can be respected and accepted, and each person can choose their own path in life without being bound by tradition and family expectations.

The participants watch British TV dramas to maintain a connection with the world, as they want to be part of the global conversation, both to hear and be heard from. First, participants accumulate cosmopolitan capital through British TV drama and increase their international competencies. They broaden their horizons by learning English, literature, culture and traditions through British TV dramas. Watching British TV dramas is a cost-effective way to understand the world without actually traveling abroad. Second, they are yearning for global connection, recognition and visibility. As British TV drama continues to offer meaning to their accumulated lifestyles, tastes and cultural awareness, they fear losing what they once enjoyed and identified with, especially in a society accompanied by unpredictable challenges and changes. Finally, watching British TV dramas, especially through pirate channels, is their way of resisting state media policies and strengthening ties to global communities. They refuse to be subjected to strict media texts, endless media regulations, and an orthodox social atmosphere. British TV dramas are a window to the world and provide valuable cultural materials for young Chinese to engage with their growing needs to be global citizens.

In the process of globalization, China has turned into a country with “sharp cultural contrasts and contradictions” (Feng, 2012, p.85). The rapid transition from agrarian to industrial and modernisation in just a few decades has deepened social inequality and has led to a perceived loss of traditional Chinese customs (Feng, 2012). Following political upheavals in the past few decades, the cultural revolution uprooted traditional high culture, significantly altering the concept of highbrow culture in China (G.C.Li, 2020). This dynamic context sees British TV dramas, often associated with nobility, class, and quality, occupying a dominant position in the hierarchy of cultural taste. The ability to decode British TV dramas is thus seen as a form of cultural capital that is leveraged for social distinction. As a result, some participants exhibit disdain towards TV content from other countries, especially ones from Asia, as a way to practice symbolic violence on other people’s taste in cultural consumption.

The findings show clear evidence that elites adopting pro-censorship attitudes is more a reflection of their desire to maintain social distinctions. They embrace this invisible boundary to maintain and perpetuate the social status of their elite group. The participants’ privileged position was deeply rooted in the imbalance of social and economic resources which are grossly unevenly distributed. It is clear that censorship and digital mobility further facilitate social distinctions in transnational TV consumption, especially in digitally-restricted regions like China. Alongside cultural knowledge, having the digital mobility to bypass censorship is considered a new form of cultural capital and distinction in the social-political context of Chinese society.

British TV dramas have emerged as an inspiring platform for civic engagement and fostering a discourse around personal freedom, liberal values, gender equality, and inclusivity for sexual minorities. This medium enables participants to critically engage in thoughtful reflections and

discussions, especially concerning queer representations, and advocate for a freer society. In particular, the representation of LGBTQ communities in British TV dramas empowers sexual minority participants to negotiate their own identities and engage in activities to promote sexual equality in society. For instance, writing slash fan fiction that features LGBTQ communities in a positive view, and engaging in viewing LGBTQ-themed dramas with peers who are experiencing the same struggles (Chapter 5). Furthermore, participants' desires to liberate themselves from social and media constraints and exert agency over their cultural consumption underscore a resistance against censorship. This is evident in their frequent reference to rejecting state-approved content and streaming services. Their transgressive actions and attitudes towards state-controlled cultural products not only embody civic values but could potentially lead to increased engagement in political dialogues about public issues in the future.

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https://weibo.com/1642904381/zzHn5ipvX?from=page_1002061642904381_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1631100734164
- Youku (13th August, 2013c) 一对是郎才女貌，一对是恩怨痴缠，一对是兜兜转转，一对是基情无限。。。爱情就像指纹，看起来差不多，却又不尽相同~七夕特辑之英美剧里的”极品情侣” Top10，哪一对是你的最爱？ Weibo
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

- 1) Can you please tell us a little about yourself? How old are you? What are you currently doing (student, employed, etc.)? What are your interests/hobbies? Have you ever travelled abroad? What do your parents do? How have your parents raised you?
- 2) Where and how do you watch television or television content? How long roughly do you spend watching television content every week? What type of programmes do you watch? What are your favourite genres?
- 3) What British programmes (all kinds of genre) have you seen? Which ones do you like most, and why?
- 4) [If not answered yet] Is there anything particular about British drama that you like? What aspects of the British drama(s) do you find appealing? [pay attention to whether it is British specificity they like or whether there is a cultural discount]
- 5) Is there anything about British drama that you dislike or that find difficult to comprehend [clash of cultures]?
- 6) [If not answered clearly enough] Do you feel these programmes present certain British values, for instance about family, society, class, education or something else, that you find appealing, intriguing, puzzling or repulsive?
- 7) Has watching British drama shaped or changed your idea of Britain as a country?
- 8) In your opinion, what is the general attitude towards or understanding of Britain in China?

- 9) What role does language play in your consumption of British drama? (Does it appeal to you to watch something in English or is it more of a nuisance you are willing to accept?) How do you feel about using subtitles?
- 10) How does British drama compare to US drama? To Chinese drama and Korean drama?
- 11) Where do you look for information on British drama?
- 12) Do you participate in fan discussions and meet ups? And/or is there any other form of active engagement with British drama, for instance, do you buy merchandising products, create fan fiction/art or engage in cosplay?
- 13) Would you be happy if more British TV drama (or content more generally) would be shown on (linear) television so you can watch it there?
- 14) Does censorship and internet control affect your viewing of British or other drama? And if related discussions online would be forbidden, do you think you might find ways to continue?

Appendix 2: David Cameron's Weibo Account

英国首相 (设置备注)

英国首相戴维·卡梅伦

✓ 已关注 | 私信

他的主页 | 他的相册

2 关注 | 919583 粉丝 | 35 微博

全部

李克强总理给我打了电话，祝贺我再次出任英国首相。我们都期望能够继续合作，加深英中两国的关系。
5月14日 21:16 来自 微博 weibo.com

收藏 | 转发 50191 | 评论 20003 | 66991

同时转发到我的微博

全部 | 热门 | 认证用户 | 关注的人 | 共20003条

- khloe-月圆允变狼扑在 : 神夏麻烦帮催一下嘛 谢谢哟 Ma fan push
Sherlock thank you
5月14日 21:22 回复 | 1552
- 檀木木不费神 : 2333小卡呀催一下神夏啦 拜托拜托//@银河系奶粉团:
居然还知道更微博，蛮亲民的
5月14日 21:23 回复 | 396
- 骑牛羊的姑娘 : 神探夏洛克
5月14日 21:17 回复 | 1068
- 金融街牛仔很忙: 帮忙催下神探夏洛克吧谢谢了
5月14日 21:18 回复 | 5122
- 随风的Younger: 恭贺您，不用改微博昵称了。
5月14日 21:26 回复 | 3273

安哲忧: ~希望夏洛克第四季能赶快播出好么?? 我们很期待的~I hope Sherlock in the fourth quarter to catch a good fast??? We are looking forward to.~~~原谅我这个蹩脚的英语在线翻译的句子~
5月14日 21:23 回复 | 1439

哈哈哈哈哈_销魂的小棍子 : 江西人民也想给你发贺电~~~所以你电话多少?
5月14日 21:22 回复 | 813

KrisRaylee : If the Sherlock realised as soon as possible,we will have better relationship between u and us
5月14日 21:23 回复 | 3296

DeGotLuv34: 中英友好。
5月14日 21:26 回复 | 540

群成员76人

留学生群
群成员64人

查看更多 >

微关系

共同关注(1)

Appendix 3: Codebook Examples

Coding inspired by Tracy (2018).

Secondary-cycle coding		Primary-cycle coding			
Themes	Code- 2nd	Abbreviation	Code-1st	Explanation	Examples
Personal Development	Learning English	Learning	Language Learning	Answer to the question: What role does language play in your consumption of British drama?	“I like <i>Sherlock</i> , and I became really passionate about learning English because of it.”
	Cultural Mark-up	Learning	Learning Culture	Answer to the question: What aspects of the British drama(s) do you find appealing?	“I looked it up online after; the upper class in Britain did use to have this habit.”
	Identity Development	Identity	Personal Resonance	Answer to the question: What aspects of the British drama(s) do you find appealing?	“It feels so depressing because we are in the same situation. It reflects on us, the LGBTQ community in the world.”
	Social Distinction	Audience	British TV audience spend more effort	Answer to the question: How does British drama compare to US drama?	“I think American TV dramas want to attract more general audiences, and British TV dramas are more willing to attract people who want to

					understand their culture.”
Textual Appreciation	Portrayal of Character	Character	Multi-dimensional character	Answer to the question: What aspects of the British drama(s) do you find appealing	“Mary is a powerful and mysterious character, sometimes righteous, sometimes evil.”
	Narratives & Storytelling	Narrative	Narratives unpredictable and full of surprises	Answer to the question: What aspects of the British drama(s) do you find appealing	“British TV dramas often don’t develop according to routines or your predictions.”
	Emotional Realism	Resonance	Personal Resonance	Answer to the question: What aspects of the British drama(s) do you find appealing	“I was feeling depressed for a long time after seeing <i>Fleabag</i> .”
Meaning Making	LGBTQ	Appeals	Transnational appeals	Answer to the question: In your opinion, what is the general attitude towards or understanding of Britain in China?	“I think British TV drama has some role in promoting LGBTQ culture in China. Like the word “rotten country”, basically when everyone talks about Britain, that is, young people, of course, not the older generation, will use the phrase <i>rotten country</i> ,

					which represents gay.”
	Gender Roles	Portrayal of the Character	Independent women	Answer to the question: Describing the female role setting in Sherlock	“But in <i>Sherlock</i> she is an assassin, a powerful women with a complex background. This makes it more interesting, because she is not just another ‘boring girlfriend.’”
Meaning Making	Criticism	Clash	Culture Class	Answer to the question: Is there anything about British drama that you dislike or that find difficult to comprehend?	“It seems that there are storylines about cannabis in British dramas, and I think this is something I’m not quite comfortable with myself.”
Imagined Britain	Britishness	Country-specific	Heritage	Answer to the question: What aspects of the British drama(s) do you find appealing	“Britain’s cultural heritage and social atmosphere are relatively deeper than that of the United States.”
	Alternative Modernity	Britain	Best country	Answer to the question: Has watching British drama shaped or changed your	“I think Britain is the best country in the world!”

				idea of Britain as a country?	
Response to Media Policy	Transgressive Practice	Piracy	Pirate sites are better	Answer to the question: Does censorship and internet control affect your viewing of British or other drama?	“The videos provided by subtitle groups make me feel better because there are no cuts. I prefer them the best.”
	Global Connection	Connection	Jump the Great Fire Wall	Answer to the question: Where do you look for information on British drama?	“It’s very fruitful to read and discuss the fan theories with people from different cultural background, it has opened up my horizons.”
	Media Policy	Piracy	Attitudes towards media policy	Answer to the question: If related discussions online would be forbidden, do you think you might find ways to continue?	“When you have seen things that are more diverse, you will not be content with the filtered and edited stuff they show you.”