

# Body Image among Students in Beijing:

## Impact of media, status, and health concerns

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## **ABSTRACT**

The importance of body image is increasing in China. Academic research and news media point to the rising desire for an ideal appearance, especially among young people in the country, in order to gain an advantage in society. This thesis was conducted to examine if university students at a high-ranking university in China were influenced by commercial ideals in the media to the same extent as young people in other settings in China have been shown to be in earlier research. This was done using a qualitative approach with a combination of in-depth interviews with students at Peking University and participant observation. The findings were interpreted through four different theoretical frameworks in order to analyze students' perception of body image ideals shown in media, how these ideals are related to importance of status, as well as the implications they have for students' mental and physical health. The study found that even for Peking University students, the necessity of possessing a favorable appearance cannot be neglected in order to enhance chances of future success. An ideal appearance was important for gaining status, and the quest for it had implications for students' health.

Keywords: China, university students, body image, media effects, status, student health.

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# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1. Research problem**

China is a country where things are changing at a fast pace. The last three decades of rapid economic development combined shaped by globalisation have dramatically improved the living conditions of urban Chinese as well as introduced new values and desires worth striving for within society. The expanding market economy has also increased the supply of consumer related phenomena such as fast food restaurants which now can be found in almost every one of China's major cities. Technological improvement assisting an increasingly sedentary way of life combined with a schooling system that favours academic subjects such as math instead of physical education is another phenomenon visible in modern day China. The result of this has been a rise in obesity levels in the country. This is especially prevalent among the young population, such as students in the country's many schools.

At the same time, the development of the health and fitness related institutions and products, as well as the fashion industry, is also expanding, exposing more and more people to the commercial ideals of what they should look like. In academia, several scholars have pointed out that declining physical health patterns, such as a rise in obesity levels, is a reality among Chinese students. Research has also been done that point towards an increasing obsession concerning body and appearance ideals in relation to what is being displayed in the media (Baird & Grieve, 2006; Grabe, Hyde, & Ward, 2008; Luo, Parish, & Laumann, 2005; Tang & Chen, 2013; Zhang, 2012). In China, as in the Western world, it is becoming increasingly important to have an ideal appearance in order to get ahead in society. Young people have a tendency to be sensitive regarding topics such as outward appearance. Traditionally, being fat or chubby has been viewed as a sign of both health and wealth in the Chinese society, especially when it comes to children. As this traditional view contradicts with today's media images of being thin, it might result in possible confusion among the people that are exposed to it.

## **1.2. Research purpose and aim**

Students that attend Peking University are studying at one of the most well-known and respected universities in China. They are enrolled in one of the most prestigious learning institutions in China and are bound to be under a lot of pressure to excel academically as it is possible that many of them in the coming future will hold important positions in various areas of Chinese society. The lifestyle choices that these young people there are making today will most probably have an influence on their lives in the future, and thus also have an impact on how Chinese society will look like tomorrow.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate and analyze how students at Peking University are affected while growing up in a society where a fast-developing economy has led to changes in values and exposed them to commercial ideals of health in the media. The study aims to examine the value students at Peking University connect with having an ‘ideal body’, and if this is any different from what has been shown in previous research. The study also aims to examine the reasons to why young Chinese are (if they are) maintaining a “healthy lifestyle”, such as exercising or eating a certain way, and their opinions on their lifestyle choices. This is conducted through a combination of interviews with students at Peking University, participant observation, and a review of academic literature. The empirical findings are then analyzed through a theoretical framework consisting of Gerbner’s *Cultivation theory*, Festinger’s *Social Comparison theory* Bourdieu’s theory on *cultural capital*, as well as Schütte’s *Asian Hierarchy of Needs*, with the aim of making these theories visible in the context of the research.

## **1.3. Research questions**

The thesis is guided by the following main research question:

- How are students at Peking University affected by prevailing body image ideals in Chinese society?

In addition, three following questions are included in order to provide the research with more depth:

- What are the factors shaping students opinion on body image?
- What are the reasons for Chinese students to lead a “healthy lifestyle”, such as exercising regularly or eating in a certain way?
- How important is appearance in comparison to health for young Chinese at Peking University?

#### **1.4. Demarcations**

The scope of this thesis is limited to interviews with a small number of Chinese students at Peking University. Therefore, the thesis cannot claim to be representative for all students at Peking University, nor can it claim to be valid for students at other universities in China. If a similar study were conducted at another university in China it might bring about different results. Furthermore, the thesis is also limited to reflect only the literature included as well as the theories of choice. While other choices on literature and theory might produce other results, the focus here is to analyze student’s opinions on health and body image through the lens of my chosen theoretical framework. The result of this study is also affected by limitations in scope of time. A study stretching over a longer period of time than one semester would have allowed for a more inclusive empirical research which in turn would have facilitated an analysis with broader scope.

#### **1.5. Disposition**

The *first* chapter is made up of the introduction to the study, which consists of a presentation of the research problem, the purpose of the research, and the research questions. Finally, the thesis demarcations and disposition is presented. The *second* chapter presents a review of academic literature on the topic of health patterns and body image in China. In the *third* chapter the methodology used in the thesis is explained. Here, the ethical considerations as well as the validity and reliability of the study are stated. The *fourth* chapter introduces the reader to my theoretical framework and how it is applied within the scope of this study. In the *fifth* chapter the findings of my fieldwork at Peking University are presented and analyzed



through the lens of the theoretical framework. In the *sixth* and concluding chapter the results are summarized and suggestions for future research are also presented.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Body image in China

The perception of body image in China has gone through several changes during the country's long history. Traditionally, during both the pre- and post-1949 China a fuller body shape was preferred as it was seen as a sign of health and prosperity (Tang and Chen, 2013). Furthermore, during the Mao era in post-1949 China the norm for women was to downplay their femininity, adopt an almost androgynous appearance, and act more like men (Chong, 2013). More recently however, the image of the ideal body in China has been subject to noticeable changes since the country launched the policy of reform and opening up to the outside world more than three decades ago. In contrast with the image of the body during the pre-reform era, a more distinct difference between men and women, with a marked increase in thinness as an ideal, especially for women, has become increasingly prevalent. An effect of the reform and opening is that the media in China during the post-socialist era became more market-oriented and influenced by foreign media and popular culture (Latham, 2007). This opening up of the economic market combined with foreign cultural influences has now turned appearance and beauty into a money-making industry that has led to a new focus on body image in Chinese society and made it an important part of people's lives there (Zhang, 2012:438).

Nowadays, visiting a major Chinese city such as Beijing or Shanghai is very much like visiting any larger Western city when it comes to the visibility of body image within advertisement, on TV, and in other media. What is shown in the media and what people talk about regarding body image is vastly different from what the situation was like just a few decades ago. In modern day China, the question of ideal body image can be summed up as a general desire for thinness among the population, especially among young women in urban areas. In the book *Fat China*, French and Crabbe (2010) write the following:

*In China, in this current period, thin is seen as preferable to a fuller-bodied figure in the vast majority of advertising [...] The perception of the 'correct' body shape being tall and thin is reinforced in the vast majority of advertising aimed particularly at girls and women [...] Thin*

*is beautiful, thin gets you the perfect partner, perfect job and all the material wealth you could want – according to the advertisers and magazine editors (p. 156-157).*

This phenomenon has been highlighted in academic literature several times. One study of a national representative sample showed that women in China in their twenties are especially concerned about their weight (Luo, Parish, and Laumann, 2005). Another survey of female high school students in Hong Kong and Mainland China found out that even though the majority of the participants were slim with an average Body Mass Index (BMI) below 20, more than half of them still expressed a desire to lose weight and become thinner (Lee and Lee, 2000). In a qualitative study, Zhang (2012) interviewed college women in Mainland China regarding their appearance ideals. A common denominator among the participants was the opinion that being thin and tall was the ideal body image, and according to the women “ a Fan Bingbing<sup>1</sup> face and a fashion model physique is what many young Chinese women long for, starve for, and even go under the knife to obtain” (p.450).

Influences from abroad are also factors that are increasingly visible within the body image in present-day consumer China. As an example, South Korean popular culture often create trends that are followed by young Chinese people within areas such as cosmetic surgery and highlight the acceptance and increased importance of the pursuit of the perceived ideal body in Chinese society (Ibid). However, the increased focus on appearance is also having a noticeable effect on men, albeit in a slightly different way. In comparison with Chinese girls, who generally wish to be thinner, Chinese men seem to express a desire to become more muscular. This has been noted in several earlier studies. Lee et al (1996) conducted an extensive study of over 1500 Chinese subjects in Hongkong and found that while females wished to lose weight even though they not were obese, the males generally wanted to be taller and have a more muscular upper body. In a study by Yang, Gray and Pope (2005), a comparison between American and Chinese males opinion on body image were made. Though the outcome showed that the Western men had higher expectations on their appearance, both groups wished to be more muscular.

Furthermore, the desire to alter one’s body shape seem to start relatively early in life. For instance, in a large study by Xie et al. (2006) over 6000 adolescents in middle and high schools in Mainland China were questioned on perceptions of body image. Interestingly, participants of normal weight often described themselves as too or relatively thin (boys), or

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<sup>1</sup> Fan Bingbing is a famous Chinese actress.

too or relatively overweight (girls). The authors came to the conclusion that exposure to U.S. media or media from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hongkong) was a key factor in creating these opinions among the boys and girls. Studies on body image in China have adopted theoretical frameworks within psychology, such as the Festinger's Social Comparison theory (1954), Berkowitz' Social norms approach (2003), and Granovetter's Social network theory (1973) to highlight factors that lie behind the choices people make in order to get closer to the perceived ideal. Others have applied gender theories developed by authors such as feminist scholar Naomi Wolf (1991) to explain differences between male and female ideals and norms in society.

## **2.2. Patterns of declining health in China**

Lifelong physical activity is associated with several benefits, which has been well documented in professional research (Blair, 1993 et al., in Forrester, et al., 2006). A study focusing on American college students, suggested that active participation in physical activity among students during the period when enrolled in higher education might have positive influence on future levels of physical activity (Forrester, et al., 2006). However, due to various changes in society, such as improvements in technology, parts of the world's population is now leading an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, which has resulted in rising levels of obesity and other negative changes in patterns of health around the globe. Since physical inactivity has been documented as being associated with increased risk of health conditions and several chronic diseases (Buckworth & Nigg, 2004), this scenario poses a threat to a nation in several ways, with one example being an increased economic burden on society (Zhang & Chaaban, 2012).

In a developing country like China, changes like these are increasingly noticeable. Here, a remarkable economic transformation has taken place during the last three decades which perhaps more than in any other nation in the world has enabled a very large number of people to transfer into the middle-class strata or even higher up the economic ladder. Moreover, China is known for its rigorous examination system which places a heavy burden on students enrolled in the country's many academic institutions, leaving little time over for the pursuit of other interests. Changing patterns of health among China's youth has become a topic engaging scholars, resulting in the production of a substantial body of research concerning physical health among the population. Many of them have observed a trend with increasingly

sedentary lifestyles as well as a general decline in physical fitness among young people such as students in China. Xu (2008) elaborates on this topic in the book *Olympic dreams: China and sports, 1895-2008*. He writes that:

*Even as the Communist party has mobilized every resource to boost the country's image as a sports power through its elite sports program, the health of the general population has been declining. In particular, according to a recent survey, the physical condition of Chinese youth has been deteriorating since 1985. Young Chinese have become fatter, less active, and overall less healthy, mainly due to a lack of exercise (p. 269).*

Further elaborating on why this has occurred, he argues that:

*This situation has arisen for several reasons. First is a dearth of funding for sports programs in the schools, which has led to inadequate physical education facilities and little encouragement from schools and teachers for children to engage in sports. China also fails to fund sports for the general population, even as it spends heavily on the training of elite athletes in pursuit of gold medals. Second, both parents and schools emphasize book learning and preparation for examinations and actually discourage young people from spending time being physically active (p. 269-270).*

Similar findings can be found in research done by other scholars. For example, in a comparative work by Zhao et al. (2007), differences in levels of physical activity between university students in China (Beijing) and the Czech Republic were measured. The outcome of the study was clear; the Chinese students were far less active in comparison to their Czech counterparts. Suggestions to why the students' levels of activity were lower included differences in exercise culture, living environment of the students, as well as a heavier academic burden (p. 111-112). In an earlier study, Tudor-Locke et al. (2003), although researching younger Chinese adolescents, noted that few of the participants took part in any physical activity outside of school, and that parents sometimes actively discouraged any activities that might interfere with school work (p. 1097-1098). They stated the following:

*Unfortunately, it appears that a strong foundation of involvement in leisure time moderately/vigorous physical activity is not currently nurtured in Chinese youth, especially in females, and that the competing societal pressure to excel at school will not soon be relieved. Perhaps most threatening, recently introduced mass television programming improvements foreshadow an amplified obesity epidemic (p. 1098).*

In the volume *Chinese Youth in Transition*, Sun (2006) presents statistical evidence of the decline of several common stamina indicators among adolescent Chinese. Various physical tests such as the standing long jump, maximum number of sit-ups, and measurement of vital capacity, all saw a decline compared with results found in earlier reports (p. 22). Thus, there are several indicators that a negative development concerning physical performance among Chinese youth is developing. Furthermore, these declining patterns of physical health highlighted in academia are complemented by a number of reports in both Chinese as well as international media echoing similar observations (China Daily, 2012; Associated Press, 2013).

Wu et al., (2009) argues that part of the explanation for the obesity epidemic in China may also have its roots in the social attitudes towards a fuller body shape. In Chinese culture, the belief that excess body fat represents health and prosperity is still present to some extent. This is perhaps a consequence of China's recent history where exposure to famine and chronic malnutrition were responsible for the deaths of millions of individuals in the older generations. It might also be possible that China's one-child policy have contributed to the growing problem of overweight and obesity in children. A possible consequence of one-child families is that the child is the sole beneficiary of attention not only from the parents but also from the two sets of grandparents. Combined with increased household wealth it may create an environment where children become excessively pampered, overfed, and lazy.

### **2.3. The relationship between body image and health**

That there is an existing relationship between exposure to body image ideals and health related behavior such as degrees of exercise or eating a certain way, i.e. various forms of dieting is well documented in research. Several studies have indicated the negative relationship, for both men and women, between having body image concerns as a reason for lifestyle-related choices such as exercise and changing one's bodyweight. Even though there does not seem to have been any studies carried out in a Chinese context, several Western studies, predominantly American, have been done. In a study by Ingledew and Sullivan (2002) the authors concluded that "Effects of body mass and body image on exercise motives emerge in adolescence, with gender differences. Such effects may influence exercise adherence and should be taken into account in exercise promotion programmes"

Prichard and Tiggemann (2008) conducted a study on motivators to why women participated in certain types of exercise. They found out that women who took part in cardio-based fitness programs generally had a more negative perception of their body image, i.e. had a stronger desire to conform to the general thin-ideal, in comparison with yoga-based fitness programs. The authors stated that “Appearance-focused reasons for exercise were found to mediate the relationship between exercise types and self-objectification, disordered eating, and body esteem”. Another study comparing appearance and health-motives for exercise and weight loss among women indicated that appearance-based motives for weight loss and exercise were associated with negative outcome.

Furthermore, another study also concluded that when promoting exercise and weight loss, focus should be on health benefits rather than appearance in order to avoid negative body image concerns among participants (Vartanian, Wharton, and Green, 2011). A study researching male exercise behavior in relation to exposure to male body image ideals found that men who exercised on a regular basis generally had lower social physique anxiety compared with men that do not exercise. This was argued to be the case due to the prevalent muscular body ideal for men that would be difficult to achieve without exercise (Hausenblas and Fallon, 2002).

#### **2.4. Thesis contribution**

Even though research on the subject of body image, as well as young people’s opinion on the subject of a healthy lifestyle has been carried out in the Chinese context before, I have not found previous studies that have tried to illustrate the connection between body image ideals in relation to status and what implications this might have for health among young adults in China. Furthermore, studies on the subject of body image and opinions on a healthy lifestyle have largely been conducted among students at other colleges and universities less prestigious than Peking University (PKU), which is seen as one, if not the most prestigious university in all of China. Due to the very rigid entrance qualifications, students who attend PKU are normally used to an intense pace when studying, and has most probably been doing so since a very young age. Students that attend PKU are therefore generally in China seen as caring less about matters such as appearance or physical fitness. However, this is the particular reason why I find it interesting to conduct research on this particular environment.

In this thesis I try to highlight the phenomenon of the increased importance of appearance and status in modern day China, and more specifically how it plays out in the high-performing academic environment that Peking University is, and the implications this has for the health of the students. I do this through analyzing my interview findings through the scope of different theoretical frameworks *Cultivation theory*, *Social comparison theory*, *Cultural capital*, and *Asian hierarchy of needs*.



### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Meta-theoretical choices**

The research for this thesis was carried out with a constructivist approach. Constructivism implies that social phenomena are produced through social interaction and also are in a constant state of revision (Bryman, 2012:33). This means that I am only presenting my subjective version of reality, which cannot or should not be seen as the only valid social reality. I therefore am not in this thesis trying to find the truth but rather to present a subjective social reality that the students at Peking University are living in.

#### **3.2 Research design**

In this thesis I adopt a qualitative research approach with semi-structured in-depth interviews as well as participant observation as the methods to gather primary data. The qualitative approach was considered to be the most appropriate method for conducting this research because it is my objective to give emphasis to “the ways in which individuals interpret their social world” (Bryman, 2012:36). The primary data in this thesis was collected through a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with students at Peking University. Participant observation was also carried out in and around Peking University in order to complement the data collected in the interviews.

##### ***3.2.1 Interviews***

Contact with the students was initially set up through a professor at Peking University who introduced the topic of my research to a small number of his students and arranged for a meeting with them. At this meeting I got the chance to present my research and establish contact with the students who were willing to participate in an in-depth interview on the topic. In addition, the snowball method (Bryman, 2012:202) was also utilized to some extent in that a few of the students participating in the interviews introduced me to other students that I in addition interviewed later on. The interviews took place at a café located on the Peking

University campus. The interviewees totalled a number of eleven students, of which nine were females and two were males. They were all enrolled in undergraduate programs at Peking University and they ranged from 18 to 21 years of age. As I have no problem communicating in Chinese, there was no need for a translator accompanying me during the interviews. The ability to be able to communicate in the native language, and not only in formal language but also in using special words and slang, is an advantage to understand and penetrate into the culture one is researching (Becker and Geer, 1957, in Bryman, 2012:494).

The absence of a third person might also have been a factor that made the respondents relax and open up more as the interview atmosphere thus became more casual. The interviews were however mostly conducted in English as the respondents expressed excitement over having a chance to practise their oral English as they, according to themselves, did not get many opportunities to interact with foreigners as students. The majority of the respondents showed a high level of spoken English, but sometimes they chose to express certain phenomena or words in Chinese as they thought that it illustrated their opinions in a better way. In these circumstances my fluency in Chinese clearly proved to be of assistance.

### ***3.2.2 Participant observation***

According to Bryman (2012), participant observation is described as a method of data collection where the “researcher is immersed in a social setting for some time in order to observe and listen with a view to gaining an appreciation of the culture of a social group” (p. 383). As I have lived in China for a total of three years time prior to conducting this research, I have been “immersed in a social setting for an extended period of time” (Ibid. 432), which provided me with a level of understanding of specific cultural phenomena in China, which indirectly laid a foundation for the research I conducted for this thesis. This prior understanding was of assistance when I during six weeks of fieldwork read magazines, watched television shows and observed advertisement billboards on the street, as well as students’ behaviour and conversations on various locations in and around the campus of Peking University such as cafés, restaurants, and sporting facilities.

One of the most common magazines found in the café on campus where the majority of my interviews were conducted was *Lifestyle*, 精品购物指南 *Jingpin Gouwu Zhinan*, a twice-a-week lifestyle-related magazine focusing on urban consumers in Beijing. While reading the

magazines I wrote down notes and took photographs or material I found would clarify my understanding of how body image and health was projected in Chinese media. My observations were either written down in a notebook, or at times I just made some mental notes and wrote them down later on. The sporting facility where I observed was the school gymnasium on the Peking University campus, where many of the students went to exercise. To further blend in to this environment, I acquired a membership in order for my observations at the gym to become more natural.

### **3.3 Ethical considerations**

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) emphasize the importance of “informed consent” as an ethical aspect of interviewing (p. 70). I thus paid attention to this in the process of interviewing my respondents. As a result, when conducting my fieldwork, I was very clear about the purpose of the research towards my interview respondents. I informed them that I would take notes during the interview and asked each respondent for permission to audio record the interview by placing a recorder on the table between me and the respondent, which they had no objection towards. The purpose of my research was explained, and before the interviews were made the respondents were shown a document with the interview questions and were also informed that their participation was voluntary, and that they for the sake of their privacy would remain anonymous in the audio recording or the thesis paper.

### **3.4 Validity and reliability**

The thesis being qualitative in nature, the results are a reflection of a specific setting and time in the society where the research was conducted. During the interviews I explained the questions in other words or repeated them in both English and Chinese if there was a misunderstanding to ensure that no information was lost in the process.

A potential drawback of the study could be how the interview respondents might have perceived me, the thesis author and interviewer. Even though the respondents themselves all were undergraduate students at Peking University, an internationally well-known university of high rank, they might have adjusted their answers to cater to the audience, a Western graduate student. The reason for this possible construction of answers might be the stated fact of the

majority of the respondents that they very seldom interacted with foreigners, and when given the chance they might choose to present a favourable image to an outsider such as myself.

There is also a possibility that the author's personal interest and opinions on the thesis topic might have been recognized during conversations with the participants. To try to avoid this I did my best to, as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) states it, display "deliberate naïveté", which is "the interviewer exhibiting openness to new and unexpected phenomena, rather than having readymade categories and schemes of interpretation"(p. 324).

## **4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **4.1. Media impact – Cultivation theory and Social comparison theory**

#### ***4.1.1. Cultivation theory***

In order to address the impact of the media on the students at Peking University regarding body image and health, I chose to use cultivation theory. Cultivation theory was developed by Professors George Gerbner and Larry Gross during the late 1970s. The main assumption of the theory is that television is incremental in shaping or ‘cultivating’ the social reality of viewers. In cultivation theory, the amount of television that is watched by someone stands in relation to how the social reality that person is living in is perceived. Gerbner (1998) defines the process of cultivation as “the independent contributions television viewing makes to viewer conceptions of social reality” (p. 180).

The original framework of the theory was developed around how violence shown on TV increases the viewers opinion that the world around is more dangerous than it actually is. Cultivation theory has nevertheless been applied in other situations as well to show validity in a broader context. One example of cultivation theory’s usage in relation to this thesis topic is Van Vonderen and Kinnally’s (2012) study on media effects on body image where cultivation is applied as a theoretical framework to illustrate the influence media images have on opinions on body image.

Cultivation theory in the context of this thesis is used to give a theoretical basis to what previous research to a large part has pointed out, as well as what I hypothesize, that the exposure of the perceived ideal body image in Chinese media has a ‘cultivating’ effect in shaping student’s opinions when it comes to their preferred appearance.

#### ***4.1.2. Social Comparison theory***

Social comparison theory was developed by social psychologist Leon Festinger (1954). The framework addresses comparisons individuals make in social settings in order to evaluate accurate levels of social hierarchy. According to the theory two kinds of comparisons are

made; downward comparison and upward comparison. Downward comparison is when a person is comparing with someone they regard as being inferior to themselves. Upward comparison occurs when people compare themselves with someone they perceive as being better than them.

Upward social comparison has been argued to be associated with negative feelings about the self. For example, Tiggemann and Slater (2003) suggest that “social comparison may provide the mechanism by which exposure to media images induces negative effects” (p. 50). Bailey and Ricciardelli (2010) examined social comparisons and their relationship with body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance in young women and found that upward comparison is one of the strongest causes for body dissatisfaction. In a study on adolescent boys and girls compare attractiveness to their peers and models in media, Jones (2002) argued that

*The repeated media images of thin females and muscular males make these forms seemingly the standard of attractiveness. Social comparison to these idealized images then appears to promote a discrepancy between the attractiveness of self and other, leading to a more negative evaluation of self (p. 646).*

Social comparison has been suggested as an important mechanism in the internalization of body image ideals and consequent feelings of dissatisfaction with oneself. I have therefore found the theory to be suitable in the context of my research to assist in the explanation of how the students at Peking University are affected by body image ideals in the media.

## **4.2. Social status – Cultural capital and Asian hierarchy of needs**

### ***4.2.1. Cultural capital***

The theory on cultural capital was originally proposed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his 1986 article *The Forms of Capital*. In this work, Bourdieu identifies three forms of capital; economic, social, cultural capital. Economic capital can be monetary assets such as cash or property, and social capital is a form of social resource derived from networks and connections providing advantages to better connected individuals. In contrast, cultural capital are resources such as education, intellect, or physical appearance. These are assets that provide the bearer with higher societal status.

Bourdieu makes a distinction between three forms of cultural capital. They are the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalized state. Cultural capital in the embodied state are long-lasting dispositions of the mind and the body, in the objectified state it refers to cultural goods such as books, paintings, or instruments, and in the institutionalized state it refers to academic qualifications that an individual holds (Bourdieu, 1986:47).

Cultural capital is often used as a framework in education research, and has previously been applied in studies on China. One example is Wang, Davies, and Bian (2006), who conducted a study on habits of book reading of reading habits among urban couples in different major Chinese cities. The study concluded that possession of cultural capital was thought to be a valuable asset in defining class boundaries and social status in China being a fast-changing society. Another example is Sheng's (2012) study that employed cultural capital as a framework to show gender differences between parents' involvement in their children's choice of higher education in China, suggesting that cultural norms such as Confucian patriarchy is relevant in the process. The theory has also been used in studies on body image. One example is Howson's (2013) book *The Body in Society: An Introduction*, which examines how people use their body in society and how cultural capital is a factor in this process. Another example is Bridges' (2009) study on the how hegemonic masculinity works as a form of cultural capital as a function among male bodybuilders.

In this thesis I will essentially be applying cultural capital in the embodied state as my work deals with appearance ideals among young people. I employ embodied cultural capital in the form of physical appearance as an asset which I hypothesize that the respondents in my thesis strive to be in possession of.

#### ***4.2.2. Asian hierarchy of needs***

The framework of the Asian hierarchy of needs was developed by Helmut Schütte and is a variation of the famous hierarchy of needs developed by Abraham Maslow. Originally it was a part of a theory on consumer behavior in Asia, and the framework can be said to be a variation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, however the difference is that it is based on Confucian values and culture instead of Western values. While Maslow's hierarchy of needs is representative of a post-materialistic culture where individual values of self-expression are considered to be more important than the acquisition of material goods, Schütte's hierarchy

represents a materialistic culture; consequently, at the top of the Asian hierarchy status is found instead of self-actualisation (Schütte, 1998).

In the context of my research it implies that individuals in the target group try to pursue certain bodily ideals as a mean to strengthen their personal assets which would enable them to manifest social status. To the extent of my knowledge, the framework has not been used in studies on body image in Asia, and it is usually employed in research on consumer behavior in Asia to highlight the perceived importance of status in Asian societies. This framework might be interpreted as somewhat simplistic or even Orientalist in its notion that people in Asian societies not would have desires to reach self-fulfillment as is suggested as the final stage for individuals in the original Hierarchy of needs developed by Maslow.

As Chinese society develops, there are both signs of materialistic as well as post-materialistic tendencies among the population. Society is naturally not stagnant, and therefore it can be somewhat problematic applying a theoretical framework that presents “one truth”. However, this does not mean that the theory cannot be applied to some extent, in order to indicate one of the trends in a society that is constantly changing and developing on several levels.

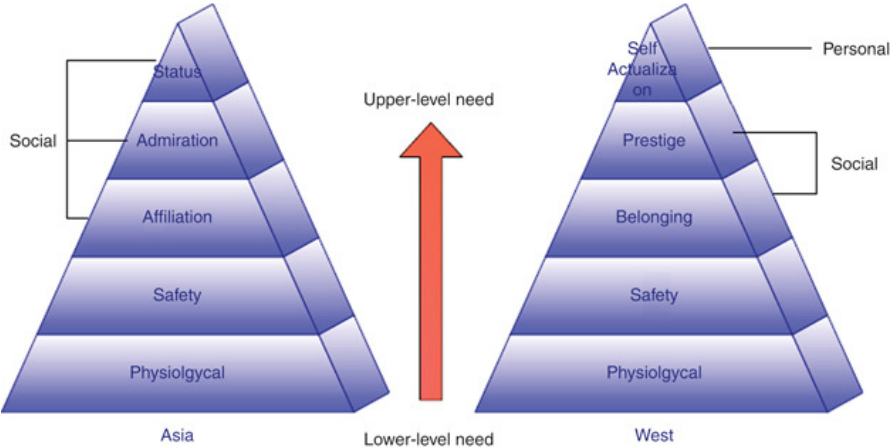


Figure 1. Asian hierarchy of needs and corresponding structure in Western societies.



## **5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

### **5.1. About the respondents**

In total, eleven people were interviewed for this thesis. All of them were students enrolled in different undergraduate programs within social science at Peking University. Except for one of the students who originally was from South Korea but had lived in Beijing for many years, they all came from different provinces in China, and had moved to Beijing to attend Peking University.

The majority of them (8 students) had never been abroad, whereas the other three students had earlier travelled overseas as tourists, and one of them (from South Korea) had experience living and going to school for several years overseas. Gender wise, the interviewees were made up of nine girls and two boys, and their ages ranged between 18 and 21. For the sake of the respondents' anonymity, I refer to them as Respondent 1-11 in the analysis. A brief description of them can be found in the appendix.

### **5.2. Media effects on body image perception**

All of the students considered media to be a vital influence in the construction of body image ideals in society. Famous movie stars, pop singers, and celebrities were mentioned as being highly influential on body image ideals. Below are examples of the respondent's opinions on the topic.

*Respondent 7 (female, 19): "Yes, media definitely has an influence – especially famous actresses, how they look like and what they wear".*

*Respondent 9 (female, 19): "I believe that media has a powerful influence on how people think. Even if you think you are not being influenced I think it still has an impact on a subconscious level and changing the way you think without you knowing it. Furthermore, I think that today's famous stars are becoming sexier than before and this also influences our preferences".*

*Respondent 5 (female, 19)* mentioned the connection between appearance and success which often is projected in media. She stated that: *“The media has a powerful influence. Superstars are always slim and successful, and people want to be like them. Especially Korean TV shows have a big influence”*.

South Korean popular culture in particular seems to have a big influence on trends among young Chinese. One TV show frequently mentioned was the very popular 来自星星的你 “My love from the star”. It is a 2013 South Korean TV drama that features very thin lead actors, both the female as well as the male protagonist. It is not strange that foreign TV shows would be influential since China’s own contemporary media is believed to already be greatly influenced by Western, as well as other Asian media (Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) (Latham, 2007). It is therefore possible to argue that shows like this that get a large following might influence young people’s opinions about their own appearance.

In some cases this might have health-related consequences for viewers due to the often unrealistic appearance of the actors. As an example, a search for the female leading actor in the show, Gianna Jun, reveals that she is 172 cm tall and weighs 48 kilograms. This would give her a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 16.2, which falls below the lower limit (18.5) of what is considered as healthy weight in relation to body height. The impact of body image on youth health in China will be discussed further in the last section of this chapter.

The respondents’ belief that media has an influence on how people perceive body image ideals is in line with what has been argued in previous research. Richins (1991) stated that idealized body images in the media affect people’s self-esteem, suggesting that exposure to idealized images lowered satisfaction with one’s own attractiveness as well as raised comparison levels of what is perceived as attractive. In an Asian context, a study by Bissell and Chung (2009) attributed prevalence of body image disturbance and presence of the thin ideal to the influence of Western media and culture.

According to the cultivation theory, what is shown on TV has an influence on how viewers see the world that they live in. The theory assumes that the higher the degree of viewing time the higher the likelihood that the viewers perception of the real world becomes altered in line with what is presented on TV. Interpreted in the context of young people in China, the thin ideal shown in media such as on television shows, would alter their perception and let them believe that the ideal projected in the media is a reality, and thus something that ought to be

possessed in order to become a successful member of society. The fact that all of my respondents acknowledged the thin body image type as an ideal for women and a more muscular body type as an ideal for men indicates the influence of popular ideals even at a place such as Peking University, where, according to a popular belief in China, students do not have any time to care about appearance due to their heavy academic burden. Among the nine female and two male interviewees, there were almost no difference in opinions on what they considered the prevailing body image ideal to be. A number of comments from the respondents regarding their belief on ideal body male and female body image are presented below to illustrate the evident similarity between their personal opinions.

*Respondent 1 (female, 21): "The ideal is skinny for both girls and boys, however boys should be more muscular than girls".*

*Respondent 3 (male, 19): "Boys should look strong, girls should look slim. Girls focus on this more than boys do".*

*Respondent 4 (female, 21): "Girls and boys should both be skinny. Boys should have muscles, girls not".*

*Respondent 5 (female, 21): "Girls should be slim and curvy, boys shouldn't be too thin, and they should look strong, but not fat. For girls, to be thin is the basic requirement".*

*Respondent 6 (female, 21): "Girls all want to be slim, but have curves at the same time. Boys should be slim but have some muscles. Girls should be slimmer than boys".*

*Respondent 7 (female, 19): "Generally girls want to be thin, two of my roommates are trying to lose weight by skipping dinner. Girls want to be sexy, while boys want to be tall and strong with muscles".*

*Respondent 10 (female, 20): "People want to look like models or idols on TV. Girls want to be slim, and boys want to be strong and have muscles".*

Three of the interviewees were rather specific on what or how an ideal appearance ought to be;

*Respondent 2 (female, 20): "Girls should look thin, about 1,68 meters tall, have long hair, be fashionable and unique. Boys should have a gentleman's style with nice shoes, above 1,80 meters tall, and should not be fat but not too skinny either".*

*Respondent 8 (male, 19): “A popular body ideal for boys is to be strong with muscles, but not fat. They should be handsome. The general ideal for girls is to be very thin and weigh below 50 kilograms. They should be beautiful with double eyelids. Girls want to have long legs. The difference between girls and boys is that for girls the weight is what is most important while boys focus more on looking strong with muscles”.*

*Respondent 9 (female, 19): “I think Chinese students today are influenced by Hollywood. Both boys and girls have specific standards for what they should look like. Girls tend to look for tall boys when searching for a boyfriend, above 1,85 meters is what they are looking for, but it is just a standard. Anyway, boys shouldn’t be too short. Boys should be taller than girls and men should be in charge over women according to Chinese tradition. Boys should exercise and not look too thin because it shows that he does nothing besides studying. For girls being thin is what matters the most, but not too skinny without curves. However, I find this is unfair to Chinese girls as we do not have the same genetics as Western girls”.*

These findings are emphasized by my personal observations during fieldwork at Peking University as well as during previous visits to China, and confirm that the thin ideal for women and the muscular ideal for men have become increasingly visible within Chinese media. To illustrate this fact a picture of the magazine *Lifestyle*, 精品购物指南 Jingpin Gouwu Zhinan is included below.

According to my own observations, commercial media projecting this kind of content are now fairly common in urban China, and I chose to use this magazine because it can often be found in places such as cafés frequented by young people. It is a picture I took when browsing through magazines at a visit to a student café at the campus of Peking University. It shows the health and beauty section of the “male” and “female” edition of the magazine. The articles describe ways how to achieve an aesthetically pleasing body, which in the case for men is to become more muscular while in the case for women it describes how to lose weight and get a slimmer physique.



Figure 2. Male edition of *Lifestyle*.



Figure 3. Female edition of *Lifestyle*.

### 5.3. Body image and status

According to the my findings, despite the pressure students at Peking university feel to excel in their studies and achieve good grades, body image still seem to be a matter preoccupying their everyday life. It is worth noting that although the majority of the respondents thought achieving high grades was of primary importance for them as students, they nevertheless expressed desire to change their own appearance for seemingly appearance-based reasons.

As these quotes show, three of the respondents acknowledged the importance of academic performance in favor of appearance:

*Respondent 2 (female, 20) "To have an ideal body is fairly important, but not as important as academic results."*

*Respondent 7(female, 19) "For me it is not important. It is secondary compared with my studies."*

*Respondent 10 (female, 20) "To have a good figure is important. People will like you more when you look good, the first impression is important and an ideal body makes you stand out. But studies are still number one."*

Naturally, it is not strange to be met by the opinion that studies are important among students at Peking University as it is an elite university in China. What is interesting though is the importance appearance seems to have even in this environment. *Respondent 11 (female, 18)* stated that: *"Even though we live in an academic environment, many of the people here still think about it [their appearance]"*.

Despite the fact that every one of the interviewees were of a slim build, the majority of them still expressed dissatisfaction with their bodies. During our interviews, I asked them whether or not they were satisfied with their own appearance and if they had any desire to change something about themselves. Five of the respondents partly expressed practical reasons for bodily change – *Respondent 1 (female, 21)* wanted to become stronger because she felt she got tired easily, *Respondent 7 (female, 19)* wanted to become taller so she could be a better volleyball player, *Respondent 11 (female, 18)* just wanted to generally be stronger and have more power, something that the two male respondents, *Respondent 3* and *8*, also expressed a desire for.

The rest of the respondents, as well as some of the five abovementioned, appeared to have purely appearance-based motives for the way they wanted to change their bodies. *Respondent 2 (female, 20)* wanted to look a little skinnier and have thicker hair. *Respondent 3 (male, 19)* wished to lose fat and gain muscle mass, because it he wanted to feel stronger and “look better”. *Respondent 4 (female, 21)* thought that she ought to be skinnier, especially around the waist. *Respondent 5 (female, 19)* desired to lose some weight, but she pointed out that she would not like to become “too skinny”. *Respondent 6 (female, 21)* was one of three respondents who seemed quite satisfied with her appearance, although she still wished to have a narrower waist. *Respondent 8 (male, 19)* was not were satisfied with the way he looked, he considered himself too thin, and wanted to do more sports to become stronger. Even though *Respondent 9 (female, 19)* was generally content with her appearance, she nonetheless wished to have slimmer legs. *Respondent 10 (female, 20)* wanted to be taller in order to look “more harmonious”.

Even though I did not specifically ask the respondents about their height and weight, it appeared to me that they were all of a slim build with no signs of overweight. Thus, their desire to alter the way they looked is therefore to a greater extent related to a wish to fit an ideal that is present in modern day China.

This implies that the reason for the majority of them to wish for changes in their appearance is most likely related to them being affected by ideals of body image that they come in contact with in their daily surroundings. The finding that possession of the “right” appearance is of importance reflects finding in previous research. These studies, was however conducted in environments that were somewhat different than the academic environment that is Peking University. According to my own observations during my time in China, there is a widespread belief that hard-working students who get top grades are usually not the most attractive students. I have heard this being stated by both younger and older people. As an example, a professor I engaged in conversation with at Peking University somewhat jokingly stated; “*Why are you doing this study here at our university? You will not find the prettiest students at our campus.*”

There is a saying that goes “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, meaning that what is regarded as attractive will vary depending on who you ask. General standards of beauty are nevertheless existent across all societies. In China however, according to my own observations, the “standard” feels somewhat more rigid than it is in Western countries. This

could just be my personal interpretation, but this phenomenon has partly been discussed in earlier research.

As an example, in a study by Zhang (2012), a number of college women in China were questioned on their opinions regarding what an ideal Chinese woman ought to look like. According to all of the participants in the study, an ideal woman should be tall and very thin with a small face with big eyes. The article also highlighted the fact that beauty standards were more or less accepted and approached by the women in a rather practical manner. The author argued that due to the majority of young people in contemporary China being only children they are many times seen as an “only hope” for their family and thus under very high pressure to be successful in life. As beauty was considered by the women to be a marker of social status it was therefore seen as something important to strive for. In the words of the author:

*The women in this study, most of them single children, were increasingly concerned about their physical appearance due to their approaching graduation from college and job search. They were fully aware of the social advantages and potential financial gains in having physical attributes that confirm to the cultural beauty ideal, whether it is having fair skin, big eyes, a thin body, or simply being tall (p. 451).*

To have a certain appearance in China today appears to be connected with many possibilities, such as higher chances of getting a job. However, even though ideals for men exist and are becoming increasingly present, it still remains a fact that women are more affected by body image norms. *Respondent 3 (male, 19)* commented that “*Girls tend to be more focused on things like body image, while guys are more interested in how to have a good career*”. It might not come as a surprise that gender differences exist in what is expected from a man versus a woman in China, where traditional gender roles to a great extent still are the norm. It is however interesting that while the female respondents generally considered the ideal female body shape shown in media to be unrealistic and unhealthy, they appeared rather pragmatic in their approach towards it. As *Respondent 2 (female, 20)* argued: “*For me my career is what matters – if my future job has certain requirements for appearance I will try to adapt to that look*”.

That appearance is a factor when applying for jobs has certainly become a reality in China, particularly if you are a woman looking for employment in the service industry, which has led to an upsurge in cosmetic surgery (CNN, 2014; China.org.cn, 2013; The American



Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2011). Thus the students' focus on appearance can therefore be argued to be partly based in firmly established norms in Chinese society which makes them more or less compelled to abide to what is needed in order to increase chances of future success.

Bourdieu's cultural capital theory states that a favorable appearance can be regarded as one of the markers of possession of cultural capital. The respondents being students at Peking University are already in possession of one form of cultural capital, institutionalized cultural capital. Institutionalized cultural capital refers to an institutional recognition, such as an academic qualification. Through being enrolled at one of the most prestigious academic institutions in China, students at Peking University are thus in possession of institutional cultural capital. This fact alone gives them a clear advantage compared to others in their age group who are not in possession of such prestigious academic merits. Perhaps not surprisingly, almost all of the respondents did point out that they regarded their studies as a primary importance, which ought to be the case due to the importance academic excellence has had in their lives since a young age.

However, as stated earlier, they did nonetheless see appearance as something very important that the majority of them were concerned about. It can be argued that this is an indicator on the power of images shown in media as well as the influence by the students' social circle as the following quotes show. *Respondent 1 (female, 21)* stated that “girls always talk about diet – even though they are already skinny, and boys talk about building muscles”. *Respondent 5 (female, 19)* pointed out that “body image is a frequent topic among female students as the desire for beauty is endless”. *Respondent 9 (female, 19)* stated that “appearance is more important for girl than for boys – in my dormitory we always talk about this before going to sleep”.

Pressure from peers, direct or indirect, might influence on what one consider as important to strive for. Perhaps they are aware of what earlier research (Zhang, 2012) has indicated, that the “right appearance” opens many doors in China, especially for women. The importance of appearance is not only a factor when finding a job – it is when finding a partner as well, and this might become a reason for acknowledging the importance of conforming to the ideal. As an example, *Respondent 7 (female, 19)* was one of the few, if not the only respondent, who gave me the impression that she was totally unaffected by body image ideals. It was therefore quite surprising when she stated the following: “I make up my own mind on what I think is

*and is not beautiful. However, if I have a boyfriend in the future and he thinks I should look a certain way my choices might be influenced by his preferences”.*

Interpreted through Bourdieu’s framework, cultural capital in the embodied form appears therefore to be of significant importance for the interviewees. In Bourdieu’s eyes, personal appearance becomes a form of cultural capital. And all forms of cultural capital are markers of high status in society.

In relation to Schütte’s framework Asian Hierarchy of needs, we can see that status is at the top of the needs pyramid in Asian societies. According to this logic individuals in an Asian society such as China should therefore be inclined to strive to reach the top of this framework.

As acknowledged by my respondents, my personal observations, as well as in previous research, possession of the “right” appearance is in China connected to enhanced possibilities as an individual in society. To have the body shape that is perceived as ideal equals to have one of the things that are needed to achieve high status. However, as stated earlier, students at Peking University are already in possession of another form of cultural capital by having high academic merits, which in itself is a marker of social status. Thus, it can be argued that the focus on appearance ought not to be as intense as among other groups in China that is lacking this form of institutional cultural capital.

Even so, the constant feed in the media showing the connection between ideal bodies and success, as well as a general consensus among young people of what one ought to look like to be, the interviews with the students show that they are affected by these trends. Embodied cultural capital in the form of appearance has substantial importance because it equals status, even at a top-tier academic institution where, according to popular belief, “the prettiest students are not to be found”, and possession of the right kind of status can in modern day China be a crucial factor in finding employment after graduation.

#### **5.4. Body image and health effects**

As mentioned in the literature review, previous research indicates a general decline in health and fitness levels among young Chinese during recent years. This phenomenon has been attributed to factors such as the rapid economic development in China enabling families to provide their children with modern technological forms of sedentary amusement such as

watching television or playing computer games. The economic development has also led to the creation of a profitable market for the fast-food industry with restaurants now found in every major city in the country.

Another factor is the heavy academic burden that lies on adolescents in China often being the only child and thus bearing the hope of the entire family on their shoulders, and therefore being required to attend after-school activities which leaves no or little time for physical education. Rising obesity levels has become a reality in Chinese society. Simultaneously, as argued in the previous section, male and female body image ideals are very present and constantly reminding young Chinese of what they should look like. The co-existence of these two phenomena might therefore impact on both a physical and psychological level.

When the respondents were asked about their opinions on what they regarded as a healthy lifestyle all of them seemed to believe in the importance of both mental and physical health. The following are the opinions of some of them:

*Respondent 2 (female, 20): "You should watch what you eat and get regular exercise, go to bed early and have a healthy mindset with clear goals of what you want to do".*

*Respondent 3 (male, 19): "To get enough sleep and have time to exercise. It is also important to relax both physically and mentally".*

*Respondent 5 (female, 19): "Wake up early and go to bed early together with regular meals and exercise. It is also important to have a joyful mindset".*

*Respondent 6 (female, 21): "Go to bed early and wake up early. Exercise 2-3 times per week. Do not eat too much fast food, and remember that mental health is important too".*

*Respondent 7 (female, 19): "Eat well and sleep well. Do some sports. Try to have inner peace and a positive attitude towards life".*

In addition to physical criteria such as regular exercise and meals, two of the respondent stressed the importance of being a good student as a part of having good mental health:

*Respondent 9 (female, 19): "Eat vegetables and fruit and do sports. Study is also a part of a healthy lifestyle".*

*Respondent 10 (female, 20): "Have healthy eating habits and exercise regularly. Have an optimistic attitude and appreciate the people around you. Focus on your work or study".*

Ten out of eleven respondents mentioned exercise and proper nutrition as an important part of what they thought a healthy lifestyle ought to include and some of them also touched up on the subject of mental health as a cornerstone of healthy living. Knowledge of the importance of a healthy lifestyle is crucial during adolescence since habits formed during this time in life usually shapes behavior later in life (Glanz, Rimer, and Lewis, 2008).

The students' awareness reflects the findings in a study by Wang et al. (2013) that examined senior high school students in Shanghai and their perception of health and fitness, with similar results. Only one of the interviewees, *Respondent 1 (female, 21)*, did not mention exercise or healthy eating habits as factors for healthy living. In her opinion, a healthy lifestyle was "*to enjoy life in different ways not necessarily in the 'ordinary' way to be healthy*". She did however mention that she thought she needed more exercise because she felt that she got tired easily. She shared this feeling with several of the other respondents who also felt they were too weak.

Interestingly, a number of the students were of the opinion that it could be a bad thing to be "too healthy", and that someone who paid a lot of attention to living a healthy life actually could become something of a burden in social interactions between friends as the following quotes show. "*To be too healthy can be a bad thing*" (Respondent 1), "*If someone is too healthy it is counterproductive for popularity*" (Respondent 2), "*People that are too healthy are difficult to be around*" (Respondent 5 and 6). The other respondents, however, generally considered people with a healthy lifestyle to be a positive influence on other people.

The respondents considered healthy living to be an important part of their lives to give them energy to perform the things they wanted to do and reach their goals in life. Some of them mentioned that exercise gave them the energy they needed to cope with their stressful academic environment. In contrast, one respondent cited heavy academic pressure as a reason for low levels of exercise, and two of the respondents pointed out bad air quality as another reason.

Several of the respondents mentioned weight-loss as a reason for exercising and one mentioned that she knew of several students at school who took part in exercise just to be thin and popular, even though they did not enjoy it. The majority of the respondents stated that they participated in some form of exercise, and they mentioned both health and appearance as reasons for exercise. Out of the two male students interviewed, only one was physically active, with basketball as his favorite form of exercise. The other male respondent (Respondent 8)

claimed that he did not exercise due to a lot of homework and other activities. As the following quote show, *Respondent 10* was not very physically active since she found it too strenuous: *“I do walking because running and swimming is too tiring”*.

While the non-exercising students were a minority of the total number of respondents it is nonetheless an indicator of what has been shown in earlier research; that levels of physical inactivity is on the rise in China. Between 1991 and 2006 average weekly physical activity among Chinese adults fell by 32% (Ng, Norton, and Popkin, 2009). As this decline in part has been attributed to rapid urbanization which facilitates sedentary ways of life (Ibid; Monda, et al., 2006), and as urbanization is projected to continue in China, it can be argued that for the overall status of the nation healthy habits are ought to be encouraged among students. In relation, Zhang and Chaaban (2012) estimated that physical inactivity in China amount to a total cost of 6.7 billion USD in 2007.

Regarding preferred forms of exercise, several of the female respondents had running as their preferred form of exercise as the following quotes show. *“I run because it is a convenient form of exercise. It allows me to gather my thoughts and relax”* (Respondent 5). *“I do exercise, but not very often. I would like to do more but factors such as bad air quality and myself being lazy stops me from doing that. If I exercise I like jogging”* (Respondent 9). *“I play volleyball and badminton, and I also go jogging”* (Respondent 7). *“I run which I started to lose weight and it has since become a habit that I cannot be without. I know of students who just exercise to control their weight but do not actually like it. They do it just so they can become popular”* (Respondent 2).

The fact that a number of the female students chose running as a preferred form of exercise is something that is in line with what I observed in the university gymnasium. In contrast with the weight area which mostly was occupied by male students, the cardio area with treadmills was occupied by female students. As Respondent 2 stated in the quote above I got the impression that several of the girls in the gym did not seem to really enjoy working out, but merely did it as a way to stay thin, or become even thin, since the majority of them were already of a slim build. The fact that body image ideals were influential in motives for exercise is illustrated in a quote by *Respondent 6*: *“I dance because it makes me feel good and it can help me change my body shape”*. She expressed what many of the other respondents also had touched upon, that while exercise made them feel good, the desire for a change in appearance always seemed to be a factor of concern.

According to Bourdieu's framework, cultural capital is made up of individual resources within the cultural sphere, distinct from economic and social assets. Due to the increased focus on body image in China, and the reality that a certain appearance opens many doors, the physical exterior of an individual is a factor that young people such as students to large part cannot neglect. However, the unrealistic and unhealthy ideals that they are bombarded with in everyday life may lead to unhealthy motives for exercise and lifestyle changes. It has been documented in research that appearance-based motives for exercise is associated with increased levels of negative feeling towards one's own exterior (Prichard and Tiggemann, 2008). This implies that the importance of cultural capital in the embodied state among Chinese youth might result in both mental as well as physical implications among certain individuals. It is simply not enough for Chinese students to be in possession of cultural capital in the institutionalized state such as academic credentials to secure a promising future, not even for students at Peking University.

Earlier research on body image among Chinese youth has pointed out that parents or other elderly members of the family might be a factor in internalizing ideals and creating feelings of insecurity among young people (Zhang, 2012). This kind of pressure from the family might be a factor in developing negative feeling about oneself. According to Tudor-Locke et.al (2003), parents to some Chinese students are sometimes actively discouraging them to be physically active in order to have more time to succeed at schoolwork. The students I interviewed seemed to be aware of these phenomena, but at the same time stated that they got a lot of support from their parents, who encouraged them to think about their health as a number one priority. Perhaps the case is different for students who attend Peking University in the aspect that their parents probably already are very proud of their children's academic achievements and therefore perhaps do not worry about it to such a great extent any longer.

When asked what of their opinions on popular ideals in media about half of the respondents considered them to be acceptable, and what mattered was how you approached these ideals. I would argue that this can be a sign of internalization of the ideals that the students are shown on a daily basis, something that the following quotes are an indicator of.

*Respondent 3 (male): "I think that the ideal shown in the media can be both helpful and harmful depending how you react to it. Becoming obsessed and doing too much is not good".*

*Respondent 5: "I would say that the ideal you see in the media is acceptable because it makes you control yourself. It can however be dangerous if you put too much attention to it and overdo it".*

*Respondent 8 (male): "I think the ideal in the media can be good, but some students take it to the extreme and chase stars too much".*

*Respondent 9: "I think it depends on how you approach the popular ideal – it can lead to positive results such as making people exercise more, but it can also lead to negative results such as unhealthy weight-loss behavior".*

*Respondent 10: "I think that the ideal shown in the media is appealing, but normal people who do other things for a living do not need to look like that".*

However, as the comments below show, the other half of the respondents considered the ideal as too thin and unhealthy to strive for:

*Respondent 1: "I think the ideal is too skinny, and it can have a bad influence on someone who is insecure".*

*Respondent 2: "If you go to extreme ways to look like people in the media it can hurt your health".*

*Respondent 4: "The ideal is not good, it is unhealthy and not worth striving for".*

*Respondent 7: "I do not think it is worth striving for because you do not need to look like the superstars".*

The respondents thus pointed out both negative and positive aspects of the current body image ideals. According to them, a positive aspect of the thin-ideal may lead some people in need into exercise, but at the same time they also saw a negative aspect in that the ideal might lead to unhealthy weight-loss behavior or excessive exercising among certain individuals. Several of the respondents mentioned that they knew of students at the university who had adopted unhealthy measures to achieve what they perceived as an ideal body. While sharing this information, they also made it clear that they themselves never would engage in any behavior that would harm their health just in order to achieve a certain appearance.

While I do not believe that the respondents would be dishonest towards me, I could not escape thinking that they might have wanted to present a healthy image towards me in order to give

me a positive impression them, and at the same time reinforcing a positive image towards themselves. I find it quite interesting that despite their opinions on the health-related concerns an overly thin body might bring, the majority of the female interviewees still expressed the will to lose weight or become slim down certain parts of their body regardless of the fact that none of them seemed overweight at all.

Social Comparison theory talks about upward and downward comparisons. Upwards social comparison occurs when we compare ourselves to people we perceive as better than us. In the case of the students I interviewed at Peking University, it might be the case that they are comparing upwards with images of celebrities, and desire to be like them because they believe an ideal appearance will bring high status and present with them many advantages in life. The problematic aspect of this is that research has shown that upwards social comparison is associated with increased feelings of negativity regarding oneself (Tiggemann and Polivy, 2010; Halliwell, Dittmar, Orsborn, 2007). This implies that as people strive for an ideal that to a large part is unrealistic or unattainable, they are increasing feelings of negativity which in turn can result in psychological problems, such as depression or lowered self-esteem, as well as physiological issues such as improper eating habits or excessive exercise for the wrong reasons.



## 6. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The interviews with the students at Peking University, the participant observation made at the university and around in Beijing, combined with earlier personal observations in China, as well as a review of earlier literature has resulted in several different findings. Regarding media effects, the respondents seemed to be of the opinion that it had an influence on how body image ideals are perceived by their group in society. Even though some of them disproved of the current ideals, several found them acceptable which can be interpreted as a sign of internalization of these ideals. Acceptance of ideals in media is in line with the cultivation theory framework that states that increased exposure to constructed realities on television will lead to viewers altering their reality and accept what is shown on TV as valid.

The interviews show that students at Peking University are, despite the fact that they are immersed in one of the most prestigious universities in China where they are constantly under pressure to excel academically, nonetheless spending a considerable amount of time worrying about how their appearance relates to the current body image ideal in society.

According to Bourdieu's theory on cultural capital, by being enrolled in Peking University the respondents in this thesis are automatically bearers of cultural capital in the institutionalized state, and when they graduate they will have academic credentials from one, if not the foremost learning institutions in the whole of China. As expected, several of the interviewees expressed their dedication to academic excellence. The interviews and observations made during the fieldwork nevertheless indicate that this is not enough. I would argue that this finding is the foremost contribution of this thesis, and what surprised me the most. It is an indicator of the many pressures young people in modern day China are under. I initially hypothesized that body image ideals would be an influence even for students at Peking University, but not to the extent that has been shown in this thesis. Possession of an appearance close to the perceived ideal shows to be of high importance due to the many advantages a favourable exterior possibly will bring an individual, especially for women.

As earlier reports and research has shown, the importance of appearance in China has made it difficult to neglect in something as essential in an individual's life as the process of finding a job. The outcome of this is that cultural capital in the embodied state gains importance. The desire to conform to the perceived ideal becomes a matter of increasing one's chances of

survival in an urban society. Personal appearance turns into an asset for young people in a market economy where the even the brightest individuals at top-tier universities are more or less compelled to conform to body image ideals in order to secure their chances of a successful future.

When the findings are interpreted through Schütte's theory on Asian hierarchy of needs, it becomes evident that despite other factors such as the students' knowledge on how to live a healthy life or the fact that they, as students at Peking University, already ought to possess an enviable position in society due to their academic achievements, the advantage it brings to have an ideal body is nevertheless very important in their quest for status. By stating this, I do not believe that status is the sole thing the students are striving for. China is a country of contrasts and most likely has as many individual dreams and desires as it has inhabitants. Schütte's framework was rather applied to this thesis to highlight the significance of status in China. China can in some regards arguably still be seen as a somewhat more materialistic society in comparison with relatively more post-materialistic societies in the West. And, as Schütte argues, while the utmost goal in a post-materialistic society is to reach self-fulfilment, what is seen as most important in a comparatively materialistic society such as China is to some extent, is to achieve high social status.

The findings in this thesis also show that the importance of appearance has implications for the students' physical and mental health. While they considered a healthy lifestyle with adequate amounts of exercise and regular meals to be a key ingredient to possess a healthy body, the thin-ideal projected in society was still seen as acceptable by half of the interviewees. What is interesting is despite the absence of overweight among the participants, and despite their overall consensus that health was seen as being higher in importance than appearance; the majority of them nevertheless expressed a desire to conform to the perceived body image ideal, i.e. thin and curvy for women, and thin and muscular for men. In line with Social Comparison theory, the wish to emulate someone who is perceived as better than oneself is an upward social comparison, and is associated with negative emotions towards the self. Thus, the students are in risk of creating negative feeling about themselves in the process of comparing with an ideal that they need to adapt to in order to facilitate future chances of success. The quest for an ideal appearance might in some cases also result in physical harm, something that according to the interviewees was fairly common on campus among female student who adopted unhealthy behaviours such as skipping meals to get closer to their body ideal, which is a factor for concern.

In line with the findings of this thesis, it should be suggested that there are further fruitful topics for research related to the impact of body image on young people in China. Due to the majority of research being focused on women or girls, a different gender perspective with an increased focus on men or boys, such as a study on masculinity in an Asian context, could for example be a focus in order to further highlight the differences between how male and female students are influenced by body image ideals and how it shapes their behaviour.

One interesting topic could also be to study the differences between various groups of young people in Chinese society, such as university students and migrant workers, and examine the reach of body images in different socio-economic groups and social status groups. Another possible direction would be to study consumer products in relation to appearance and health, such as the growing fitness industry or the market for dieting products.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix 1 - Interview respondents

In total, eleven students were interviewed between 2014/03/10 and 2014/03/31. Nine were female and two were male. All of them were enrolled in the School of Government, studying Political Science, Government Management, or the interdisciplinary program Politics, Philosophy, and Economics.

*Respondent 1:* Female, age 21, originally from Seoul, but has lived in Beijing for several years. Her mother is a teacher and her father is a businessman. She was interviewed on 2014-03-10.

*Respondent 2:* Female, age 20, from Shanghai. Her mother is an accountant and her father is a high school teacher. She was interviewed on 2014-03-10.

*Respondent 3:* Male, age 19, from Inner Mongolia. Both his parents are professors in his hometown in Inner Mongolia. He was interviewed on 2014-03-10.

*Respondent 4:* Female, age 21, from Guangdong. Her mother works in the government and her father works for a national company. She was interviewed on 2014-03-11.

*Respondent 5:* Female, age 19, from Beijing. Her father works in the army and her mother works in the government. She was interviewed on 2014-03-11.

*Respondent 6:* Female, age 21, from Anhui. Her father is a doctor and her mother is a teacher. She was interviewed on 2014-03-13.

*Respondent 7:* Female, age 19, from Xian. Both her parents work in the government. She was interviewed on 2014-03-16.

*Respondent 8:* Male, age 19, from Qiqihar, Heilongjiang. His mother is an accountant and his father works in the government. He was interviewed on 2014-03-16.

*Respondent 9:* Female, age 19, from Chengdu. Her mother is a high school teacher and her father is an engineer. She was interviewed on 2014-03-19.

*Respondent 10:* Female, age 20, from Kunming. Her mother is a high school teacher and her father works in a state-owned enterprise. She was interviewed on 2014-03-23.

*Respondent 11:* Female, age 18, from Guangdong. Both of her parents are teachers. She was interviewed on 2014-03-31.

## **Appendix 2 - Interview questions**

Age / 年龄:

Gender / 性别:

Major / 专业:

Hometown / 家乡:

Family background / 家庭背景:

1. What body ideals are popular among students?  
对学生们来说，什么样的身材是理想的？
2. What differences are there in body ideals between girls and boys?  
男人理想身材和女人理想身材有什么不同？
3. How are body ideals created among students? Through which channels?  
在学生们的生活里，理想身材的想法是怎么造成的？通过什么样的渠道？
4. Are body ideals something that students discuss a lot among each other?  
理想身材是学生们经常谈到的事情吗？
5. Is it important to have an ideal body among students? Why/Why not?  
作为一个学生，具有理想的身材很重要吗？为什么？
6. What do you think is an ideal body?  
对你来说，什么是一个理想的身材？
7. Are you satisfied with your own body/appearance? Why/why not?

你对你自己的身材满意吗？为什么？

8. Is it important to have an ideal body to become popular among others? Why/why not?

有理想的身材会让周围的人更喜欢你吗？为什么？

9. Do you think the media has a big influence on the way body image is perceived among students? What kind of media?

你认为媒体会影响学生们对身体形象的想法吗？什么样的媒体？

10. Do you think the ideals presented in the media are healthy/worth striving for? Why/Why not?

你认为媒体里的身体形象是值得追求的吗？为什么？

11. What are the factors that influence the way you think about body ideals?

什么样的因素会影响你对身材理想的想法？

12. Is having an ideal body the same as being healthy? Why/why not?

理想的身材等于健康吗？为什么？

13. Is being skinny the same thing as being healthy? Why/why not?

瘦/苗条的身材等于健康吗？为什么？

14. What are your feelings about overweight people?

你对肥胖的人有什么样的想法？

15. What is a healthy lifestyle for you?

对你来说，什么是一个健康的生活方式？

16. Is it important to have a healthy lifestyle to become popular among others? Why/why not?

有健康的生活方式会让周围的人更喜欢你吗？为什么？

17. Is a healthy lifestyle a high priority for you as a student?

作为一个学生，有健康的生活方式对你来说重要吗？

18. Do you think that exercise/working out is an important part of a healthy lifestyle?

你认为运动是健康生活方式的重要部分吗？

19. Do you exercise? Why/why not? What kind of exercise? Why this form of exercise?

你平时运动吗？为什么？什么样的运动？为什么这种？

20. Do you follow any diet/way of eating? Why/why not?

你有什么特别吃喝的方式吗？为什么？

21. Do you have any other comments regarding the topic(s) of the survey?

关于调查的题目，你有其他的想法吗？