



Class, Cultural Capital and Cultural Consumption: Exploring the Effects of Class and Cultural Capital on Cultural Taste in Korea*

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This paper examines differential cultural consumption by class in contemporary Korean society, focusing on the effects of cultural capital on cultural consumption and taste. The findings of this study show that the new middle class participates more actively in cultural activities than the old middle class and the working class. The new middle class has more diversified tastes than other classes, and is able to enjoy the consumption of both popular and high culture. This study further reveals that access to cultural capital in the period when a person is growing-up significantly influences cultural consumption. Finally, it argues that those with omnivorous tastes (for popular culture and high culture) are status seekers, because of their high income and education level.

Keywords: class, cultural capital, cultural consumption, cultural taste

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, Korean society has entered a period of fully-fledged mass consumption. The consumption sector has expanded dramatically, due to rapid economic growth, the development

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of science and technology and the enhancement of household income, and consequently, consumption patterns and lifestyles of the masses have been transformed. Even before the late 1990s, when Korea faced an economic crisis, perceptions of consumption among Korean people had continued to be upwardly standardized to cope with globalization of the world economy. In this process, the middle classes have played a key role in the extension of a culture of consumption.

Concern with consumption culture in relation to class and status is a fairly recent phenomenon in Korean sociology. Previous studies have dealt with differential consumption culture by class or stratum (e.g., Chang 2002; Cho 2005; Hahm et al. 2001), the relative importance of cultural capital and economic capital (Chang 2001; Cho 2005), and cultural tastes and cultural capital uniquely found in Korean society (Choi 2006; Han and Park 2007; Han et al. 2007; Lee et al. 2008). In this paper, we examine differential cultural consumption patterns by class in contemporary Korea focusing on the effects of cultural capital on cultural consumption and taste. Previous research on cultural consumption in Korea has mostly focused on specific cultural tastes such as preference for styles of music or types of movies, but this paper includes various cultural activities such as viewing movies, attending the theatre, classical music concerts or the opera, and visiting art exhibitions or museums.

This paper explores the relationship between class and the pattern of cultural consumption, and the effect of cultural capital on that relationship. It also investigates whether diversified cultural tastes that include both highbrow culture and mass culture (omnivorous) are a marker of high status in Korean society. We examine “revealed preferences” (i.e. cultural consumption) conditioned by social class and cultural capital and omnivorous cultural taste as the linchpin of stratification in cultural consumption which reveals a high status.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Class and Cultural Consumption

There exist two contrasting views on differential cultural consumption by class. One view argues that the relationship between social class and cultural preferences has been maintained. The other argues that post-industrial society is no longer a class-based society and therefore, contemporary patterns of consumption do not simply represent class status.

Since Bourdieu (1984), who argued that there exist cultural differences by class, class-specific culture has been corroborated by empirical research (e.g., Katz-Gerro 1999, 2002; Lamont 1992; Wynne 1998). This line of argument can be summarized as follows: between different classes, there exist diverse cultural differences which bring about differences in leisure activities, food, housing, social concerns, linguistic habits and child-rearing methods. These views were rebutted by post-modernists who argued that as consumption becomes

diversified and individualized in a post-modern society, cultural differences by class will diminish and disappear (Baudrillard 1981; Giddens 1991). However, many studies have explored the close relationship between class and culture.

Lamont (1992), for example, indicated a “symbolic boundary” with respect to moral criteria such as superiority and frankness, cosmopolitanism, high culture, religion, money and power, by exploring cultural differences between the upper middle classes of the US and France. The symbolic boundary constitutes the core of the symbolic-evaluative distinction for representing high status when classifying people. While the theory of cultural capital assumes that strategies for distinction are organized around tastes and lifestyles, a boundary approach indicates that cultural consumption constitutes a kind of sign of social status.

Following Bourdieu (1984) and Lamont (1992), the symbolic boundaries used by the upper middle class are examined by content analysis of personal advertisements appearing in the *New York Review of Books*. The analysis provides support for Lamont’s argument regarding the importance of economic and cultural resources in creating social boundaries among members of this class. In addition, positive personality and physical resources are found to be important dimensions in the creation of symbolic boundaries (Kern 1997).

Wynne (1998) argues, on the basis of an empirical study on its leisure activities and lifestyles, that the new middle class is segmented and thus should not be regarded as a unified aggregate. According to him, such segmentation is derived from cultural preferences and tastes and related to economic factors, but this does not determine segmentation itself.

In a study analyzing the relations of leisure and music tastes to strata in American society, Katz-Gerro (1999) classified cultural types into four categories: high culture, popular culture, field activities and adolescents’ music. He argued that race, gender and education, as well as class, may influence cultural preferences. In a comparative study of cultural consumption, the same author raised the question of whether cultural consumption should be categorized by class, given differences in race, ethnicity, gender and region. He discusses the association between class and cultural consumption such as leisure time activities and cultural tastes in a diverse modern society (Katz-Gerro 2002). The study concludes that consumption of high culture is related to class in various ways.

Previous research carried out in Korea on class and cultural consumption can be classified into two groups. The first group supported close relationship between class and taste. For example, Chang (2002) argued that white collar workers exhibit a high level of interest in classical music, artistic activities and reading books, while those who belong to the *petit bourgeoisie* exhibit a strong preference for delicious and healthy food but a low preference for classical music. However, the working class is excluded from both material and artistic consumption. Similarly, Cho (2006) reported the distinction between social class in taste.

The second group of researchers argued that the effect of social class on tastes is limited. For example, Yang (2009) suggests that the effect of social class on the differentiation of

musical taste is very limited and instead such socio-demographic factors as age, sex and religion are more important factors. In a similar manner, Han and Park (2007) argue that the effect of social class on cultural consumption loses much of its explanatory power once other dimensions of social differentiation, such as gender, generation and the area of residence, are taken into account.

Cultural Capital and Consumption Culture

The issue of differential consumption patterns was incorporated into the domain of class by Bourdieu (e.g., 1984, 1986). Bourdieu (1986) stressed that unique tastes and the mode of preferences for consumption are related to specific occupations and class groups. He distinguished cultural capital from economic capital in explaining class-specific behaviours. The various types of capital influence marker goods representing status symbols. Since Bourdieu's seminal work, research on cultural capital has dealt with tastes in terms of preferences for the form of cultural objects (e.g., DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; DiMaggio 1987; Peterson and Simuk 1992) or the contents of tastes (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). In previous studies, it has been widely assumed that the objective form of cultural capital works effectively in a stable cultural hierarchy, since in Western industrial societies the cultural hierarchy has been gradually diluted and cultural capital as an exclusive class boundary has also been weakened as a mechanism in daily life.

As for the contents of tastes, it is important to ask whether the cultural objects that Bourdieu described as resources expressing exclusive tastes among Parisians during the 1960s are applicable to other societies in different socio-historical contexts. Despite such limitations, Bourdieu's theory provides insights into the relationship between social conditions and the areas of taste and consumption (Holt 1998).

While economic capital is a way of distributing economic goods and services, cultural capital indicates a way of distributing social status between groups. Cultural capital consists of a set of socially rare and distinctive tastes, skills, knowledge, and practices. Cultural capital exists in three primary forms: embodied as implicit practical knowledge, skills, and dispositions; objectified in cultural objects; and institutionalized in official degrees and diplomas that certify the existence of the embodied form (Bourdieu 1986; Holt 2000).

Overall, cultural capital has been studied in two ways. One type of study is related to the effects of cultural capital on educational achievements and the other is the effects of cultural capital on tastes and consumption patterns. More specifically, research topics include the effects of cultural capital on educational achievement (e.g. DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Lareau and Weininger 2003; Nash 1990), and cultural capital and participation in highbrow or high-status culture, leisure and tastes, i.e., cultural art consumption (e.g. DiMaggio and Useem 1978; DiMaggio and Ostrower 1990; Erickson 1996; Holt 1998; Katz-Gerro 1999, 2002; Peterson and Kern 1996).

With the increase of research into cultural capital, its meaning has been defined in various ways, including knowledge of high culture (DiMaggio and Useem, 1978), educational achievement (Robinson and Granier, 1985), curricula in elite schools (Cookson and Persell, 1985), and participation into highbrow cultural activities (DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985).

In Bourdieu's *Distinction*, cultural capital plays a theoretical role quite different from other forms of capital. It constitutes an indicator and foundation of class position. Cultural attitudes, preferences and behaviours were conceptualized as "tastes" used in social selection. Bourdieu showed the diversity of tastes by studying cultural capital and economic capital. In other words, differences in education and occupation lead to segmented aspects of cultural capital, as exemplified in credentials or personal preferences and behaviours.

Erickson (1996) criticized Bourdieu's analysis of class and culture on the grounds that it neglected two important aspects of social structure: social networks and class relations at work. Bourdieu expected high-status culture to be useful in class differentiation because it is correlated with class, but Erickson insisted that culture used at work includes both genres related to class (used in domination) and genres unrelated to class (used in coordination). High-status culture is correlated with class but is excluded, or not used, in the competitive private sector. The most universally useful cultural resource is cultural variety, and social network variety is a better source of cultural variety than is class itself.

In relations to this, a line of research into cultural consumption has paid attention to the fact that people who enjoy high class culture have diverse tastes. That is, the transition from snob to omnivore implies qualitative change as cosmopolitanism is the foundation characterizing elite status (Katz-Gerro 1999; Peterson 1992, 1997a, 1997b; Peterson and Kern 1996).

In research into the effects of cultural consumption on class identity or class belongingness (e.g. DiMaggio and Useem 1978), consumption of highbrow culture or art also has class characteristics and class division is associated with specific patterns of cultural consumption. Therefore, ownership of cultural capital became a tool of class identity. Concerns with art were associated with membership of a certain class group (DiMaggio and Useem 1978).

Previous studies conducted in Korea mostly provide supportive evidence for the effect of cultural capital on consumption culture. Cultural capital affected musical taste (Chang 2001; Choi 2006; Yang 2009) and preference of movies (Lee and Chang 2008). Concerning cultural boundary and cultural hierarchy of Korean people, Lee and Chang (2008) argue that symbolic boundaries dividing social groups are not weakened and a breadth of taste is one of the most important signals that show the membership of the elite group in cultural terms.

Stated in this way, the present study contributes to our understanding of cultural consumption patterns differentiated by class groups and tastes by answering the following questions: Firstly, does the Korean middle class distinguish itself from other classes in terms of lifestyle, especially in cultural and artistic consumption? Secondly, do cultural preferences measured by popular and diversified cultural consumption vary by subgroups of the middle class? Thirdly, does cultural

capital during the period in which a person grows up affect popular or diversified cultural consumption? And fourthly, is diversified cultural consumption a status marker?

DATA AND METHODS

Sample

The data used here were collected by a nationwide survey carried out in 2006 as a part of the middle class project by the Korean Sociological Association. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the males and females aged 19 and above over a period of three weeks in August 2006. The total usable sample size was 1,515. The sample was selected through a process of multi-stage area cluster sampling.

Variables

Class

Class was divided into three categories. The literature identifies four categories of class: the upper middle class (the upper stratum of the middle class), the new middle class (white-collar workers), and the old middle class (petite bourgeoisie) and the working class. However, for the purposes of analysis, in the present paper the upper middle class and the new middle class were treated as a single group, because of the small size of the sample. For regression analyses, the class variable was converted to dummy variables, taking the working class as the reference category.

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital included “cultural capital during the growing-up period” and “educational attainment.” *Cultural capital during the growing-up period* was measured by the frequency of viewing movies, drama, pop music performances, classic music concerts or opera, and of visiting art exhibitions or museums with the family before the age of 20. *Educational attainment* was measured by years of schooling.

Cultural Consumption

Cultural consumption was divided into popular, highbrow and diversified cultural consumption. *Popular cultural consumption* was measured by the frequency of going to movie or drama theatres over the previous year and it ranged from 0 to 82. *Highbrow cultural consumption* was measured by the frequency of attending music concerts, musicals and operas, visiting museums or art exhibitions over the previous year and it ranged from 0 to 40 (see Nam, 2010 for details). *Diversified cultural consumption* subsumed both highbrow and popular cultural consumption.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

Of the 1,515 respondents analyzed, 49.6 per cent were men (N=751) and 50.4 per cent were women (N=764). The average age of the individuals in this sample was 42.7 years old. In terms of education, approximately 40 percent of the respondents received college education or more. As for the category of class group, the sample consisted of 2.4 percent (N=37) upper middle class, 18.4 percent (N=279) new middle class, 21.5 percent (N=326) old middle class and 27.8 percent (N=421) working class. Since the sample size for the upper middle class is too small to interpret meaningfully, we collapsed it into the new middle class. The other category (32.3 percent; N=489), which included unemployed and housewives, was excluded from the classification of class. Average age, household income and years of schooling are presented in Table 1.

Cultural Consumption Tastes

Types of cultural consumption can be classified into four categories; popular consumption, highbrow consumption, diversified consumption and no specific tastes. The first type refers to those who have only popular cultural taste, which constitutes the highest percentage among the four (39.5%). The second indicates those with highbrow cultural taste (2.1%). The third refers to those who enjoy both popular and highbrow cultural tastes, which we call “omnivore” taste (25.9%). And the fourth type includes the rest who reported neither popular nor highbrow tastes (32.5%).

At present, even in advanced societies, very few people consume only highbrow cultural artifacts, and they are exposed to middle- or low-brow cultural activities as well (see Peterson and Kern 1996). Thus, highbrow cultural consumption was incorporated into diversified cultural consumption in this paper. Overall, the type of highbrow cultural taste constituted only 2.1% and no significant difference could be found between class groups. Also the type of popular culture taste (univore type) seemed to have nothing to do with class groups except for a slightly higher percentage in the new middle class. Thus, we focused our attention on the categories of omnivore taste and no specific taste. The old middle class and the working class

Table 1. Average Age, Family Income and Years of Schooling

Class	N	Age (Years)	Household Income (10,000 Won)	Years of Schooling
New Middle Class	316	37.4	469.5	14.3
Old Middle Class	326	46.9	370.2	12.3
Working Class	421	44.3	309.5	11.4

Table 2. Types of Cultural Consumption Tastes by Social Class

Type	N	New Middle Class	Old Middle Class	Working Class
Popular	598	46.6	36.8	39.0
Diversified	424	42.3	22.7	22.1
No Taste	493	11.1	40.5	39.0
Total	1,515	100.0	100.0	100.0

revealed higher percentages of the no taste type than the new middle class, while those with omnivore taste were found more frequently among the new middle class, but the old middle class and the working class were found less frequently than the former two classes in the omnivore taste type.

Popular Cultural Consumption

Table 3 shows the effect of social class and cultural capital on cultural consumption. This study uses OLS regression models and variables are entered in three blocks: socio-economic variables, class variables and cultural capital variables. Model 1 shows that the younger and the higher family income, the more people spend on popular cultural consumption (Model 1 of Table 3). When we added class variables to this model, R squared increased in a statistically significant way. That is, the new middle class appeared more likely to spend on popular cultural activities than the working class, but the old middle class showed less spending on cultural consumption than the working class (Model 2).

If we take cultural capital into account, the explanatory power for popular cultural consumption further increases. In particular, more spending on cultural capital in the period of growing up facilitate popular cultural consumption in later years (Model 3). The new middle class showed the highest percentage in both popular and diversified cultural taste since those with no taste were found more frequently among the old middle class and the working class. Table 2, by and large, reveals that the pattern of cultural consumption tastes is divided into two groups. Table 2 implies a polarized pattern of tastes with respect to cultural consumption, with the old middle class and the working class constituting one group while the new middle class formed the other. In fact, no significant difference was found between the old middle class and the working class. As Table 1 indicates, the old middle class and the working class are more akin to each other than to the new middle class with respect to socio-demographic attributes such as age, family income and educational attainment.

Table 2 implies that while popular cultural consumption appears highest among new middle class, diversified consumption is also high, although to a lesser extent. However, the percentage difference between popular and diversified tastes among the old middle and the working class is much higher than among the new middle class. Furthermore, people who reported no tastes amounted to about 40% of the old middle and the working class.

Table 3. OLS Regression of Popular Cultural Consumption on Class and Cultural Capital

Independent Variables		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Step 1	Age	-.222(-.416)***	-.199(-.374)***	-.186(-.348)***
	Gender (female)	.635(.047)	.818(.061)*	.535(.040)
	Family income	.004(.150)***	.004(.129)***	.003(.107)***
Step 2	New middle class		1.865(.127)***	1.598(.109)**
	Old middle class		-.851(-.060)*	-.894(-.063)*
Step 3	Education			-.043(-.022)
	Cultural capital in growing-up period			.807(.194)***
Constant		12.060***	10.989***	10.367
R ²		.230	.254	.286
R ² change		.230***	.023***	.033***

Note | Standardized regression coefficients in parentheses.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Table 3 shows the effects of class and cultural capital on popular cultural consumption. In Table 3, controlling for age, gender and family income, membership of the new middle class positively affected popular cultural consumption, which means that the new middle class is more devoted to popular culture than the working class as the reference group. Membership of the old middle class negatively affected popular cultural consumption which means that the old middle class is less likely to participate in popular culture than the working class (Model 2). If we take cultural capital variables into consideration, the class effects remain statistically significant, with participation, in descending order of engagement, being the middle class, the working class and the old middle class. With socio-demographic and class variables considered, cultural capital in the growing-up period was significant in explaining popular cultural consumption.

Highbrow Cultural Consumption

Highbrow cultural consumption is measured by the frequency of going musicals, classic music concerts, operas and art exhibitions during the preceding year. Family income and age turn out to be significant for highbrow cultural consumption. Table 4 shows the effects of class and cultural capital on highbrow cultural consumption. Model 1 shows that the younger and the higher family income, the more people spend on highbrow cultural consumption. If we add class variables into the model, the new middle class exhibits higher participation in highbrow cultural activities than the working class (Model 2). Model 3 indicates that the higher family income, the higher educational level and the more cultural capital during the growing-up period, the more is spent on high culture and art consumption (Model 3). Highbrow cultural consumption is positively associated with family income and cultural capital.

Table 4. OLS Regression of Highbrow Cultural Consumption on Class and Cultural Capital

Independent Variables		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Step 1	Age	-.019(-.101)**	-.014(-.074)*	.002(.010)
	Gender (female)	-.027(-.006)	.021(.004)	.005(.001)
	Family income	.002(.169)***	.001(.147)***	.001(.092)**
Step 2	New middle class		.604(.115)**	.346(.066)
	Old middle class		.007(.001)	-.085(-.017)
Step 3	Education			.187(.104)**
	Cultural capital in growing-up period			.329(.221)***
Constant		1.035**	.704*	-.905
R ²		.047	.059	.116
R ² change		.047***	.011**	.057***

Note | Standardized regression coefficients in parentheses.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Diversified Cultural Consumption

Table 5 shows the effects of class and cultural capital on diversified cultural consumption. As shown in Model 1, age and family income were also found to be significant for diversified cultural consumption. Including class variables in the model, the new middle class exhibits a higher participation in diversified cultural activities than the working class (Model 2). Model 3 shows that cultural capital in the growing-up period and educational attainment explain significantly more spending on diversified cultural consumption.

In Table 5, controlling for socio-demographic variables at Step 2, the new middle class was statistically significantly different from the working class at the 0.1% level, while no difference was detected between the old middle and the working class for diversified cultural consumption. With socio-demographic and class variables being controlled at Step 3, both cultural capital variables exhibited strong effects on diversified consumption. In particular, the more cultural capital a person had in their growing-up period, and the higher the educational level achieved, the more likely it was that he or she would participate in diversified cultural consumption. Controlling for cultural capital variables, the new middle class also spend more on diversified cultural consumption than the old middle class and the working class. Cultural capital in the growing up period and membership of the new middle class were influential explanatory variables which affect diversified cultural consumption. In other words, members of the new middle class who were more likely to have been exposed to cultural activities during their growing-up period and who received higher education tended to participate more actively both in popular and diversified cultural consumption than the old middle class or the working class.

Table 5. OLS Regression of Diversified Culture Consumption on Class and Cultural Capital

Independent Variables		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Step 1	Age	-.029(-.309)***	-.026(-.273)***	-.012(-.131)***
	Gender (female)	-.062(-.026)	-.030(-.013)	-.025(-.011)
	Family income	.001(.247)***	.001(.218)***	.001(.133)***
Step 2	New middle class		.395(.151)***	.205(.078)*
	Old middle class		.005(.002)	-.078(-.031)
Step 3	Cultural capital in growing-up period			.238(.322)***
	Educational attainment			.063(.178)***
constant		2.033***	1.817***	.389
R ²		.195	.215	.341
R ² change		.195***	.020***	.126***

Note | Standardized regression coefficients in parentheses.

The reference category is working class.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Is Omnivore a Status Marker?

We now turn to the question of whether those who enjoy cultural activities are higher status people than those who do not. Also we are concerned with whether the type of taste is associated with the status of people who enjoy cultural activities. Is omnivorous cultural consumption a status marker? To answer these questions, we carried out multinomial logistic analysis in relation to the type of tastes for popular and diversified culture, with those with no tastes as the reference group (Table 6). People with no distinctive taste are older, less well educated and have lower family income than any other cultural taste group. The results from the analysis show that those with popular cultural tastes are younger and come from families with a higher family income, and with a higher level of cultural capital than those with no tastes. Compared with those with no tastes, those with diversified cultural tastes were also younger and from families with higher family income and higher cultural capital. Among the three types of tastes, the omnivore showed the highest income and educational level, and consequently it can be seen that the omnivorous type is a status seeker. The new middle class exhibited higher participation in diversified cultural activities, which means that the omnivore type of taste is a status marker of the new middle class.

The results from the multinomial logistic analysis indicate the effects of cultural capital on the type of tastes. Controlling for age, gender and family income, the effect of cultural capital during the growing-up period turns out to be significant in explaining popular and diversified types of tastes. In particular, the effect appears strongest among those with omnivorous tastes. These findings imply that omnivores have more cultural capital during their growing-up period

Table 6. Multinomial Logistic Regression of Cultural Taste on Class and Cultural Capital

	Popular	Diversified
	B(Exp(B))	
Age	-.059(.943)***	-.042(.959)***
Gender (female)	.133(1.001)	.052(1.053)
Family income	.001(1.001)**	.002(1.002)***
New middle class	.503(1.653)	.567(1.763)*
Old middle class	-.287(.751)	-.385(.680)
Cultural capital in growing-up period	.245(1.277)**	.619(1.857)***
Educational attainment	.126(1.135)**	.270(1.310)***
intercept	.658	-3.124***
-2LL	1742.755	
Pseudo R2 (Cox and Snell)	.362	

Note | The reference category is no taste (non-participant).

than univores and those who express no tastes.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Korean middle class has enjoyed material benefits during the period of high economic growth, and pursued new lifestyles in response to their desire for better consumption. The consumption of culture and art was contingent upon age, income and education. But controlling for these variables, a clear class boundary could be identified. The new middle class is more likely to participate in cultural consumption than the old middle class and the working class. The new middle class was inclined to engage in both high culture and mass culture, exhibiting diversified cultural tastes. The cultural activities of the new middle class seem to show inclusive cultural preferences rather than exclusive participation in art. Cultural capital during the growing-up period had strong effects on popular, highbrow and diversified cultural consumption. Those with diversified cultural tastes (omnivores) have more abundant cultural capital than those with popular cultural taste (univores) and those with no distinctive tastes in cultural consumption.

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