EXPLORING THE MEANING OF ETHICAL CONSUMPTION: A CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

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A thesis submitted to
The University of Gloucestershire
in Accordance with the requirements of
the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Business School
September 2016
Abstract

The existing literature on ethical consumption is primarily developed from a Western perspective; those from other parts of the world remain under-represented. This study offers an authentic Chinese perspective of ethical consumption: revealing Chinese consumers’ responses to the Western notion of ethical consumption and describing their interpretations of ethical consumption in a Chinese context. A phenomenological approach was adopted to explore this Chinese perceptive through consumers’ lived life stories and experiences. Four focus groups and fourteen interviews were conducted to ‘make text’, thematic analysis, guided by a hermeneutic approach to interpretation, was then used to produce rich meanings.

This study’s findings highlight the significance of traditional Chinese cultural virtues, and in particular, those attached to reconstructionist Confucianism. The outcomes illustrate that these traditional Chinese virtues are still deeply embedded in Chinese consumers, speaking through them and influencing their construction of the meanings of ethical consumption. Virtues such as harmony, thrift, being humble, trustworthiness, humanness and righteousness, loving one’s family and extending this love to others, are particularly relevant. This Chinese perspective of ethical consumption, therefore, can be viewed as ‘a bundle of virtues’. This bundle does not operate in a fixed order, but rather the elements interact with the external environment and thus the virtues used are influenced by specific situations to provide the basis for ‘ethical consumption’ in context.

The study findings also indicate the usefulness of virtue ethics in the field of ethical consumption. This leads to the suggestion that future research adopt a virtue ethics lens, rather than falling back on either a principles-based (deontological) or outcomes-based (consequential) perspective. Thus, even though this study considers a Chinese perspective, it offers a response to the Western notion of ethical consumption that underscores the importance of context, environment and situation. This leads to a position where research need to address, appreciate and incorporate the collaboration of governments, organizations and individual consumers in achieving a ‘true’ sense of ethical consumption.
Author Declaration

I declare that the work in this was carried out in accordance with the regulations the University of Gloucestershire. It is original except where indicated by the specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic work. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdoms or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the authors and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed: [Redacted]

Date: 15th September, 2016
Acknowledgement

I have been dreaming of writing this acknowledgement for a very long time. The idea of writing an acknowledgement excites me as it signifies the end of the thesis. At this very moment, I feel glad that I have this opportunity to express my deep gratitude. To recall this research journey…Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisors: Dr Lily Wang and Dr Philippa Ward. Without their help and support, there would be no thesis. Secondly, my gratitude to all the participants and gatekeepers, thanks go to them for offering their trust and openly sharing their stories and experiences for this research. Thirdly, I want to thank my viva examiners: Prof. Barry Davies and Dr Al-Ling Lai, and Dr Robin Bown for chairing my viva.

In addition, I would like to express my deep thanks to our beautiful Park campus, and the friendly and helpful staff in it. I have enjoyed studying in such a stunning campus and being so close to nature. The staff from the Research Administration Office to the international office have all been helpful over the years with every single detail. I want to thank them here: Cris from the Student Achievement Team, Sabina, Charley, Niki from the Research Office, Jane, Richard and Ken from the ICT Team, Jo our lovely Chaplain, the librarians, security guards and cleaners, and many more staff whose names I do not even know, but feel heart-felt joy for their friendly nods and smiles.

I want to thank my parents and family who are in Beijing and lent me mental endurance and offered generous financial support during my studies. Thanks them for giving me the opportunity of studying in the UK and respecting my decision to do a PhD. I also would like to thank my colleagues and friends in the postgraduate researchers’ office, Maryam, Aasim, Vivian, Bru, Nita, Naza, Rose, Ronald, Ryan, Ali for their friendship and encouragement – always.
‘Thanks for roses by the wayside; thanks for thorns their stems contain.’

Thanks be to God-Father, Son and Holy Spirit
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. i

Author Declaration ........................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgement ........................................................................................................... iii

Prologue ............................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1. Introduction ..................................................................................................... 6
  1.1 Introduction ................................................................................................................. 6
  1.2 Personal rationale for the study ............................................................................... 7
  1.3 Research rationale ..................................................................................................... 8
  1.4 Contextualization of the study ................................................................................ 11
  1.5 Contributions of the thesis ....................................................................................... 13
  1.6 Thesis overview ........................................................................................................ 14

Chapter 2. Literature Review ............................................................................................ 17
  2.1 Introduction ................................................................................................................. 17
  2.2 Genealogy of the concept of ethical consumption .................................................. 18
    2.2.1 The concept of ethical consumption .................................................................. 18
    2.2.2 Studies of ethical consumption ......................................................................... 22
    2.2.3 An alternative logic in studying ethical consumption ...................................... 29
    2.2.4 Ethical consumption vs. ethical consumerism ..................................................... 31
    2.2.5 An overview of consumerism and capitalism ................................................... 34
  2.3 Moral philosophies ..................................................................................................... 36
    2.3.1 Consequentialism .............................................................................................. 37
    2.3.2 Deontology ........................................................................................................ 38
    2.3.3 Moral foundation of the Western concept of ethical consumption and its specific
         concerns .................................................................................................................... 39
  2.4 Culture: culture and consumption ............................................................................ 50
  2.5 Chinese cultural values: searching for the suitable term ......................................... 53
  2.6 A comparison of Reconstructionist Confucian and Western moral values ............ 56
    2.6.1 A conversation between Confucian moral vision and Western moral principles .. 57
    2.6.2 A Confucian view on human and nature relationships ...................................... 66
  2.7 Confucian moral implications on consumption ....................................................... 69
    2.7.1 Frugality ............................................................................................................. 70
    2.7.2 Cheng-xin .......................................................................................................... 71
6.5.2 An ethical consumer as ‘junzi’............................................................................255

6.6 Summary ..................................................................................................................256

Epilogue .........................................................................................................................258

A simple purpose ...........................................................................................................258

Learning as threshold experiences..............................................................................258

Reappraisal my ‘Chinese-ness’ ......................................................................................260

Imagination in the research process ............................................................................261

Personal reflections on consumption............................................................................261

References .....................................................................................................................263

Appendix 1. Street sellers in an urban-rural-fringe context ........................................299

Appendix 2. Consent forms ..........................................................................................302

Appendix 3. Conference paper .....................................................................................305

List of Figures

Figure 1 Ethical spending in the UK .............................................................................. 8
Figure 2 Chinese disposable income 2005-2015 (in Chinese Yuan) ......................... 11
Figure 3 A Linear model example .................................................................................23
Figure 4 Theory of planned behaviour .........................................................................25
Figure 5 Modified theory of planned behaviour ..........................................................27
Figure 6 A recursive model of social action .................................................................30
Figure 7 Urban area in Changping, Tian tong yuan, Hui long guan .........................107
Figure 8 Rural area in Changping ................................................................................107
Figure 9 Location of Changping District in Beijing .......................................................108
Figure 10 A fruit basket on sale for RMB 1,2998 .........................................................216
Figure 11 A recursive model/logic in understating consumer behaviour .................249
List of Tables

Table 1 Definitions of ethical consumption ............................................. 20
Table 2 Examples of food scandals in China ............................................ 73
Table 3 Participant information for the interviews .................................... 112
Table 4 Examples of developing questions for focus groups .................... 114
Table 5 Focus groups information ......................................................... 117
Table 6 General questions for interviews ................................................. 121
Table 7 Examples of topics and Western related ethical issues ................. 122
Table 8 Examples of level three questions ............................................. 122
Table 9 A comparison of thematic analysis steps and hermeneutic circle ... 131
Table 10 A comparison of traditional criteria and alternative criteria ....... 134
Table 11 The concept of ethical consumption: a comparison from a Chinese and the Western perspectives ............................................... 229
Prologue

I wish to use this small section to tell my readers how I developed my current research project. I feel this evolving process is as valuable as the final appearance of this project; as it is part of my research journey and it is a crucial part of my research transformation - both academically and emotionally. Without any background in the ethical consumption industry, it took me a while to come to a research position that I felt comfortable with and passionate about.

Like many of my PhD colleagues, I have refined my research questions dozens of times. They are witness to the process of my coming to an understanding of the subject explored. There are two sets of research questions I want to present: one from the very beginning and one that serves as the foundation of the current thesis.

Previous research questions:

1. What are the key factors impeding ethical consumption in a Chinese context?
2. What is the relative importance of the identified factors?
3. How can these impeding factors be minimized or eliminated?

The original research questions have an exclusive focus on the barriers to ethical consumption. This set of research questions was based on three substantive assumptions. Firstly, that ethical consumption is a ‘good’ concept and therefore should be promoted. Secondly, that the meaning of the concept ethical consumption has the same meaning in the Western literature and in its everyday understanding by Chinese consumers. Thirdly, the assumption is that there are factors that impede ethical consumption in China. These research questions demonstrate that I was, in essence, interested in eliciting the barriers to ethical consumption in China and that I aimed to identify the importance of these factors. Such research questions highlight the ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ prevalent in ethical consumption studies; this prevalence arises because the Western literature emphasizes that there
is a gap between what consumers say and their purchasing behaviour, and that it is important to find factors responsible for this gap. In addition, the questions implied that my previous research design would apply mixed methods, both qualitative and quantitative.

...Three years later...

The research focus has shifted from an exclusive focus on the Western perspective of ethical consumption (WPEC) to an interest in understanding the meaning of ethical consumption from a Chinese perspective (CP), particularly in an urban-rural fringe Chinese context. I feel that the diagram below helps to demonstrate the transformation process in this study. Figure 1.0 depicts three study stages: in the initial stage, WPEC was the centre of the research and the study was intended to directly transplant the Western concept of ethical consumption into a Chinese context; during the second stage of the study, I experienced a turning point and the study evolved and was redirected; in the third stage, a Chinese perspective has become central to the study and the exploration of the concept of ethical consumption has become the frame of the study.

Hourglass illustration of the study's transformation

![Diagram illustrating study transformation](image-url)

- **Beginning**: WPEC as centre
- **Transition**: China as study context
- **Present**: CP as centre

EC as study context
The research questions that serve the current study are:

1. In an urban-rural-fringe context, what are Chinese consumers’ responses to the Western concept of ‘ethical consumption’?

2. According to these Chinese consumers, what are the ethical concerns and activities related to ethical consumption in an urban-rural-fringe context?

3. How are the meanings of ethical consumption constructed by these Chinese consumers in an urban-rural-fringe context?

This set of research questions tells a very different story... Apart from the study context being more defined, in comparison to the previous research questions, this set avoids the assumptions outlined in relation to the initial ‘positionality’ in the work. Through these questions, shifts in the research are evident and the core focus in this thesis is the exploration of a Chinese perspective of ethical consumption. As a consequence, the research approach was also re-adjusted from mixed methods to a qualitative approach.

The reasons for comparing these two sets of research questions are; firstly, to demonstrate the change of the direction within the study; secondly, to indicate the transformational change implied for research methodology; and thirdly, to illustrate the change of my own perceptions of the concept of ethical consumption. Starting with a strong interest in impediments ‘causing’ the attitude-behaviour gap in ethical consumption behaviour, and an intention to apply a mixed method approach, my research culminated in an exploration of the meaning of ethical consumption in a Chinese context. It is necessary to identify what has caused such a shift.

The turning point was the first phase of my data generation; that fieldwork experience greatly affected my ideas of ethical consumption and changed the direction of my research. In this phase I conducted four focus groups. I would have used a questionnaire as the second phase if my research direction had not changed. I conducted my focus groups based on an initial literature review that had looked at the rise and treatment of ethical consumption. This treatment was largely based on research located in the
West. It was during the conduct of these focus groups that things started to move in a direction that I had not expected …

Fieldwork is nothing like work conducted in the library, but I could only tell the essence of this by being in the field. From providing briefings about the research to gatekeepers at the very beginning, issues already began to emerge. Gatekeepers had difficulty understanding my research topic; on the other hand, I also had difficulty explaining my topic. The problems lay in the understanding and interpreting the concept of ‘ethical consumption’. The meaning of ethical consumption that I had generated from the Western literature and life experience in the UK, my gatekeepers found hard to comprehend. However, that did not stop me from conducting the focus groups.

That was where the real difficulties began: I tried hard to start conversations around the topics that I had generated from identifying factors impeding ethical consumption behaviour, based on the Western literature. However, these attempts did not raise much response. For example, I had problems communicating with participants and participants had difficulty understanding the terms I used, such as ‘animal welfare’, ‘no animal testing’ and ‘fair trade’.

Despite these difficulties, I completed the groups and conducted data analysis and produced a conference paper entitled *Key Factors Impeding Ethical Consumption in a Chinese Context* (I include the paper attached to reflect part of the story of my research journey; please see appendix 4). Sometime after I began to realize the value of my focus-group research, after a period often referred to as the ‘critical distance’ in research or writing, which some consider important in contributing to a good thesis. During this period, my thoughts continued to evolve, I constantly experienced confusion and doubts; these accumulated … eventually leading to an ‘mind earthquake’. The old thoughts fell to pieces, my initial research tower eventually collapsed and became ruins … but in the ruins I also saw hope. So a redirected project started; my current research is built on the ruins of the initial research, which contained many of my old research assumptions and illusions.
‘Nova et Vetera’ translates as: ‘the new and the old’; I would like to borrow this motto to lead the following presentation of my thesis.
Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction
I love storytelling and would like to start this thesis with some (continuing) stories.

At the time of submission one of the top news stories is the Volkswagen emission scandal reported on 22th Sept 2015, which has shocked the world media, Volkswagen’s customers in the U.S. and other consumers worldwide. This story has raised the question of where a firm’ credibility is and how consumers can trust a business’ ethical claims. Similar questions were also highlighted in the Ethical Consumer Conference 2015 (held on 25th Sept), Vivian Woodall, the founder and Chief Executive of the Phone Co-op (IPC) was one of the speakers and shared his views; he suggested that we should have a ‘no-fraud certificate’ to regulate business claims. This suggestion made many of the audience laugh, but there was a considerable silence after those laughs (Author’s conference notes, 2015).

The second story also emanates from the Ethical Consumer Conference; Dr Dan Welsh gave a talk on ‘Reducing consumption-challenges and opportunities’ in the afternoon session on the same day. At the very beginning of his speech, he clearly stated that his presentation was about ‘less consumption’ rather than ‘ethical consumption’; as if ethical consumption and less consumption are two separate topics and have a clear boundary (Author’s conference notes, 2015).

The third story mirrors the current political change in the Labour party in the UK. The UK media, (such as the BBC, the Guardian, Independent and Daily Mail) widely reported Labour’s new Shadow Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Kerry McCarthy’s views on meat consumption and farming. The reports stated that “Labour's new shadow minister Kerry McCarthy, a vegan, has called for public advertising campaigns to warn people against eating meat … She claimed that meat eaters should be treated like smokers” (Ellen, 2015). This political view has opened debate in the media and amongst consumers. It raises questions
such as: how can consumption be made sustainable and what is ethical consumption?

There are a number of reasons for selecting these three stories as the beginning of the thesis. Firstly, they are relevant to the on-going discourse around ethical consumption. Secondly, these stories, although generated in a UK context, interestingly resonate with some of this study's findings. Thirdly, this study also tells a story about exploring and discovering the meaning of ethical consumption.

This thesis describes a shift from a Western perspective of ethical consumption to a Chinese perspective. As such, a naturally shifting perspective can be found in the thesis itself. This shift was also the result of my gaining purchase on what ethical consumption means to me as a consumer and as a researcher.

1.2 Personal rationale for the study

My interest in ethical consumption originated in 2008 from the consumption of an ordinary cup of coffee when I first arrived in UK. I drank my very first cup of coffee from the refectory in the Park Campus, University of Gloucestershire. It was just an ordinary coffee, yet it sowed the seed for my research into ethical consumption. There was a small logo on the cup: (logo retrieved from Fair-trade Foundation, 2016). I then naturally associated this logo with what I had recently learned in my language course, what fair-trade means. This was where, for the first time, I had a real encounter with a ‘fair trade’ product. From that initial encounter, I started noticing this logo on many other different products, such as chocolate, sugar, tea, rice and bananas as I engaged with my day-to-day consumption activities as an international student in the UK. Alongside my growing recognition of fair-trade products, I also noticed other logos and slogans during my daily consumption: for example, sweat-shop-free clothing, no animal testing or cruelty free skin care products and ecological toilet rolls. I had never thought about these things in my previous life in China. I found them here in the UK and I gradually learnt what the issues behind those logos are. I was
constantly amazed by what one can learn from purchasing products in everyday consumption activities in the UK environment. Such interests eventually lead me to conduct my Masters’ research based on the concept of green consumption; which in turn led me to the PhD research on ethical consumption, a Western concept that I had encountered and engaged with in a Western environment – that of the UK. However, I was determined to explore this concept in a non-Western context – that of China: my homeland.

1.3 Research rationale
In the past three decades, ethical consumption has become well-developed in the Western world and it has largely has been promoted by ethical consumerism and by ethical campaigns (Bray et al., 2010; Harrison et al., 2008). A large variety of (possibly) ethical products can be seen in the market, from organic milk and free-range eggs to energy saving light bulbs and bio-laundry detergent. According to a longitudinal study by the Co-operative Bank, sales of ‘ethical’ goods have grown more than threefold in 10 years, from £13.5 billion in 1999 to £46.8 £billion in 2010 (Co-operative Bank report, 2011). Figure 1.1 illustrates the ethical spending in the UK in previous decade.

Ethical consumption and ethical consumption behaviour have also received considerable attention from scholars, researchers and marketers in Western society. A great number of studies have been conducted on this topic (Bray et al., 2010); these can fund in the journal articles, books, magazines and
websites addressing the topic (Adams, 2010). However, there is a lack of attention in relation to ethical consumption in a non-Western context, such as China.

Ethical consumption is part of a wider ‘consumption paradigm’ (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2006) and there has been a growing debate about the importance of ethical consumption in recent decades (Harrison et al., 2008). According to Burke et al. (1993), all purchasing behaviour is to some degree ‘ethical’, involving moral judgements. It is closely associated with the idea that consumers can improve matters through ethical consumption choices (Connolly and Shaw, 2006; Low and Davenport, 2007). Consumers ability to ‘make a difference’ through everyday consumption can be seen as a form of activism (Bryant & Goodman, 2004, p. 344).

As such, at the outset of my study, I was convinced that ethical consumption would play a significant long-term role in China. It would be beneficial to China’s sustainable development to a large extent. Ethical consumption would potentially assist in alleviating the environmental burden and balance the level of resources, as well as ensuring the welfare of society and animals. In addition, it might help with maintaining harmony within a fast developing society. At the level of the business and company, by meeting international ethical standards, the competitiveness of products ‘Made in China’ would be enhanced through associated image benefits. From a consumer aspect, ethical consumption would benefit Chinese consumers in terms of the quality and safety of the products consumed. Through the application of ethical standards, the quality and safety of products would be more assured and consumers would hopefully feel more confident about their consumption and therefore purchase the products made ‘ethically’. My initial belief was that China should embrace ethical consumption.

China is now the second largest economy and largest trading nation in the world (The World Bank, 2016; Thirwell, 2015). Since 11th December 2001, China has been a member of World Trade Organization (WTO). This has brought an additional impetus for reform in China, opening-up the country on many levels and providing the reasons for a ‘socialist’ modernization drive;
as well as offering considerable opportunity for China’s economic growth. The evidence of this can be seen in China’s GDP growth from 11,086.31 (CNY) in 2001 to 68,550.60 (CYN) in 2015 (International Monetary Fund, 2016).

Alongside the rapid growth of the economy; a parallel concern with sustainability has emerged (Cody, 2012). China’s carbon emissions are reflective parameters mirroring its economic growth. In 1950, the emissions were only 5.46 Mt CO$_2$; it increased to 8.50 Gt CO$_2$ in 2012; total emissions increased more than a 100-fold during those sixty years, making China the country with the largest emissions in the world (Liu, 2015). This growth was the highest among the world’s major economies (Liu, 2015). In particular, the emissions increased at average rate of 5% between 2000 and 2012, which also accords with China’s GDP growth since joining the WTO. The rapid growth of economic and social transformation in China has resulted in unsustainable levels of resource usage and ecological degradation, driven by excessive market growth and consumption (Anderlini, 2010). Recently, issues such as air pollution in China’s major cities – including Beijing - have brought such degradation into sharp relief.

The need to balance sustainable development and economic growth is a forceful driver. China now has a population of over 1.4 billion and the consumption power of the nation should not be underestimated. As figure 1.2 below shows, Chinese consumers’ disposable income has increased from 9421.6 (CNY) to 28844 (CNY) in the past decade. The rapid growth of disposable income reflects Chinese consumers’ growing purchase power. Consumer buying is a key component of many countries’ economic systems (Dickinson & Carsky, 2005). This is also true for China where, for example, Chinese private consumer spending amounted to almost 36% of its GDP in 2012 (The Economist, 2014). Such consumption and its continued growth can be seen as a key element of China’s ‘rebalancing’ act (Green 2014 cited in Wassener, 2014). As such, this rationale led me to my previous research assumption - that when trying to develop such a rebalanced position in China, the concept of ethical consumption might be helpful. This is because it is closely associated with sustainability issues, such as environmental
concerns, animal welfare and human rights (Harrison et al., 2005). Thus, the previous hypothesis can be summarised as the concept of ethical consumption *should* play a significant role in balancing sustainability, consumption and economic growth in China’s development.

![Figure 2 Chinese disposable income 2005-2015 (in Chinese Yuan)](image)

*Source: Trading Economies, (2015)*

1.4 Contextualization of the study

China’s population is the largest of any country in the world, over 1.381 billion (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2010). Traditionally, in China the majority of the population are located in rural areas, as China has been a predominantly agricultural country. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, China’s urban population has now exceeded the number of rural dwellers for the first time in its history (Simpson, 2012). Over 680 million Chinese now live in cities – 51.27 per cent of China’s entire population. Beijing the capital of China has total population of 19,612,368 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2010); this statistic includes all the registered population of the Beijing Municipality, which consists of people holding either a Beijing permanent residence (‘hukou’) permit or a temporary residence permit.
This study is set in a rural-urban fringe context in Beijing. The term ‘urban-rural-fringe’, also known as ‘the outskirts’ or ‘the urban hinterland’, refers to the ‘landscape interface between town and country’, in other words, it is the transitional zone where urban and rural environments mix and often clash (Griffiths, 2010). There are three reasons for selecting this particular context. Firstly, the most frequent areas considered in previous research were in urban cities (e.g. Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen) rather than less developed areas in China (Verdini, Wang & Zhang, 2015). However, rural consumers’ (or rural-urban-fringe consumers’) consumption attitudes and behaviour can be very different from that of their urban counterparts (Sun & Wu, 2004). In addition, solely focusing on consumers in large cities gives no comparison to help understand the overall consumption picture in China and fails to contextualize the experiences and attitudes of these ‘urban-rural-fringe’ consumers and the substantial changes that they are undergoing (Seto, 2014).

China’s urbanization is without precedent (Seto, 2014). According to Yale Insights, only 13% of China’s population lived in cities in 1950, the urban share of the populace had grown to 45% by 2010 (and the urban population reached 54.7% by the end of 2014); it is projected to hit 60% by 2030. These increasing numbers tell a story of ‘transition’, where rural populations are ‘transferring’ to urban centres. China’s extraordinary urbanization process has gone hand-in-hand with its economic boom. There are three key features of urbanization in China: firstly, its scale; secondly, the process is still ongoing; and thirdly, it is not uniform. For example, some cities are booming while others are growing more slowly. Thus, different parts of China may be at very different phases of development (Seto, 2014).

Given the different influences of urbanization in China, it is important to understand that some cities are highly developed while others are at the beginning of the urbanization process. To compare cities at different development phases affords considerable challenges, as each one constitutes a particular case. Seto (2014) points out that in order to understand Chinese consumers who are experiencing this substantial change, it is important to look beyond the urban cities. An urban-rural-fringe
area therefore provides an appropriate site (between the urban and rural), where consumers are experiencing constant change and mixed dynamics that have elements of both rural and urban existence. However, the most frequently studied areas in previous studies have been in urban cities in China (Verdini et al., 2015) and there is a lack of attention given to consumers experiencing the transformational processes of changing from rural to urban. As such, this study is set in a rural-urban fringe context to address such issues.

This study is among the first to explore ethical consumption among the consumers who live under the dynamics of an urban-rural-fringe context in China. By setting the study in such a context, this research is also able to provide an authentic understanding of how the meanings of ethical consumption are constructed, conceived and performed, by these consumers. By focusing on consumers who live in an urban-rural-fringe context, this research additionally affords a lens to consider those who are undergoing transition, and their perspectives on ethical consumption. Furthermore, this study also provides an ‘alternative’ to the perspective of ethical consumption in the existing Western literature.

1.5 Contributions of the thesis
This study’s contribution can be summarized in four aspects. Firstly, it offers Chinese consumers’ perspectives on the Western concept of ethical consumption, which were previously unknown, and it demonstrates the ‘inappropriateness’ of directly transplanting the Western concept of ethical consumption into a Chinese context. Secondly, this study adds Chinese consumers’ perspectives on the concept of ethical consumption, which were not represented in the existing body of literature. Therefore, as such, the research provides a comparative understanding of the concept of ethical consumption from a Western and a Chinese perspective. Thirdly, if offers an alternative theoretical formwork in ethical consumption studies; instead of a principles-based deontology or outcome-based consequentialist perspective, ‘virtues ethics’ has proved to be a more useful moral framework in studying ethical consumption, one which has the capacity to appreciate individual consumers’ concerns and the specific context in which they live.
Fourthly, it gives feedback on the research approach adopted in many ethical consumption studies: traditional positivist quantitative research methods have limited the scope in understanding the complexity of consumers’ ethical consumption behaviour. There is a need to embrace alternative research approaches that have the flexibility to appreciate consumers’ behaviour as part of their overall life experiences. It further suggests that traditional linear models and the theory of planned behaviour (and similar models) are ineffective in studying ethical consumption behaviour. There is a need for innovative explorative research to (re)discover the ‘true’ nature of ethical consumption.

1.6 Thesis overview
This thesis is not presented as a linear and unproblematic research story; rather it describes a research journey. The thesis depicts an evolving research process; the trials and errors experienced, and exposes the messy reality of this piece of research. The thesis overview that follows provides a general description of each chapter, to help the reader better navigate the work.

The prologue provides the original research questions as a contrast to the final direction of the study of and the current research questions in order to give a sense of progression.

Chapter 1 - the introduction - is the beginning of the research story; it explains the research rationale including the personal and theoretical, and sets out the context of the study. It also offers an overview of the concept of ethical consumption and gives a brief outline of the contribution of the study.

Chapter 2 presents the literature review. The narrative of the literature starts from the Western concept of ethical consumption, explores historical developments, definitional matters, ethical concerns, ethical practical and the underpinning moral principles in the Western understanding. By reviewing the Western moral principles of the concept of ethical consumption, this chapter then naturally moves to examining a Chinese moral vision – Reconstructionist Confucianism. Here a moral discourse is created based on a comparative review from a Western rights-based moral approach and a
Confucian virtues-based moral vision. There is discussion of a number of key virtues, such as frugality, trustworthiness, humanity and righteousness. These virtues later proved to be useful in the data analysis.

Chapter 3 is a ‘natural history’ of the study. This pertains to methodology in a traditional sense. ‘Methodology’ is defined as a general approach to studying research topics (Silverman, 2013, p.355). As such, it is important to demonstrate the actual course of the decision making in the methodological discussion. Instead of a series of blunt assertions in the passive voice, a natural ‘history chapter’ is provided, as suggested by Alasuutari (1995) and Silverman (2013). Both authors encourage researchers to play an active role and to tell the ‘history’ of the research, narrating for instance, how responses to the various difficulties and dead-ends in the research process were resolved.

The reason for adopting a natural history chapter instead of the traditional format is to reflect the evolving process of the study. This chapter not only details the research philosophy and approach of this study, but also voices how the research direction has been shaped and how the research questions have been refined. This chapter also reflects the evolving elements of this explorative study.

Chapter 4 presents the findings. This chapter addresses the first research question: what are Chinese consumers’ responses to the Western concept of ‘ethical consumption’ in an urban-rural-fringe context? It contains descriptions of a series of responses when Chinese consumers ‘met’ the Western concept ‘ethical consumption’. Their responses towards this concept, to the specifics of ethical practice in consumption and their opinions towards the ethical concerns that the Western literature highlighted are recorded. A Chinese consumers’ perspective towards the Western concept of ethical consumption is presented.

Chapter 5 is the second findings chapter. It provides an answer to research questions two and three. It provides detailed descriptions of the concerns and activities of Chinese consumers related to their understandings of ethical consumption based on their lived experiences. In addition, it reveals how the
meanings of ethical consumption are constructed by Chinese consumers given the influences of Chinese cultural values – particularly those that can, in large part, be attributed to Confucianism - and other social and political issues. This chapter presents an authentic interpretation of a Chinese sense of ethical consumption.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis. This chapter takes the findings further by thinking beyond the details of ethical consumption activities. It offers a comparative understanding of the concept of ethical consumption between a Western marketing perspective and a Chinese consumer perceptive. Based on the different perceptions of the concept of ethical consumption, a series of reflections are made: reflections from a Chinese perspective, reflections on the Western literature and reflections on moral foundations. These reflections explicitly consider social, cultural and political issues and their impacts in understanding the act of ethical consumption. As such, this chapter moves on to highlight the contribution of this study and resolves this research journey.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction
A literature review is ‘to demonstrate skills in library searching; to show command of the subject area and understanding of the problem; to justify the research topic, design and methodology’ (Hart, 1998, p.13). Such literature review purposes are consistent with a phenomenological hermeneutics perspective, as to obtain ‘understanding’ and to ‘justify’ require interpretation of the texts in this instance the existing literature. Therefore, interpretation is already unconsciously at work even before I acknowledge this research philosophy. As Hart (1998) described, the goals of review cannot be achieved solely by reporting without considerable interpretation. The goal of interpretation is to make sense of a text, literature in this case, to understand what it says about ethical consumption and hence this is the critical issue.

The structure, or the logic, of conducting this literature is driven by a number of important questions raised during this research journey. Firstly, the question is ‘what is the concept ethical consumption about’? (as I later learned, the concept of ethical consumption in the literature review mainly represents a Western perspective). With such simple curiosity, the key tasks become reviewing the existing Western literature to gain a rudimentary understanding about ‘where this concept comes from’, ‘how it has been developed, applied and studied’, and ‘what are the central discourses around the subject area’? This process lays the basis for further exploration of the concept of ethical consumption, which then leads to the investigation of moral philosophies that provide the moral foundation for this concept. In a second stage, the question is refined to focus on a Chinese perspective. This stage involves imagination, to envisage Chinese traditional values - how might Confucius respond to this Western concept and how would he evaluate it? This is addressed by using a Confucian moral vision as the basis to create a conversation between the Chinese moral perspective and Western moral thought in regards to the concept of ethical consumption.
2.2 Genealogy of the concept of ethical consumption

The concept of ethical consumption is perceived as somewhat *mythical* in the existing Western marketing literature; this can be seen from the publications in the subject area. For instance, the term ‘myth’ is often used to describe the phenomenon ethical consumption such as ‘The myth of the ethical consumer’ (Devinney et al., 2010), ‘The myth of ethical consumer – do ethics matter in purchase behaviour?’ (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001); ‘Ethical fashion: myth or future trend?’ (Joergens, 2006). One of the purposes of the literature review, is then to uncover this myth.

I love the image of trees, for my grandfather used to teach me our family tree and he said: “a tree must not lose its roots; one must not forget one’s origin”. So the images of trees always stayed with me – its crown, trunk, as well the roots growing into the earth. The Western concept of ethical consumption can be viewed through the metaphor of a tree; quite often we tend to look at the elements of the tree visible before us, as they are something relatively straightforward and obvious to us, but we tend to forget its roots hidden underneath the surface.

If we consider the tree metaphor further, the trunk symbolizes the concept of ethical consumption; its crown represents the development and application of this concept; and the roots denote the foundations of the concept. If we go a little further, it can also be suggested that the air within which this tree grows can be seen as the context of this concept, and the soil in which it is rooted is the historical foundation from which it has been nurtured and out of which it has developed. Hermeneutics thinkers hold that the reason we are able to understand history in the first place is because “we are historical beings through and through. We are part of the history shaped by it” (Zimmerman, 2015, p.13). In hermeneutical thinking, it is important to understand the historical development of an idea, so as to appreciate fully a concept such as that of ethical consumption.

2.2.1 The concept of ethical consumption

It is not an easy task to define the concept of ethical consumption, and many researchers and scholars comment on this difficulty (e.g. Bray et al., 2010;
The difficulty can be summarized as being comprised of three major aspects. Firstly, ethical consumption, as a part of the broad consumption picture (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2006), contains various concerns, and activities and these contribute to its complicated nature (Lee, 2015). Secondly, the assessments and distinctions of ethical consumption can be subjective and complicated by circumstance (Cherrier, 2005; Kent, 2005). Thirdly, ethical consumption practice contains an extremely wide range of activities, these various practices can, at times, be downright contradictory (Littler, 2010, p28). As a simple example of this consider, the ‘reduction of food miles’ and the ‘support of developing countries’ (KPMG & Synovate, 2007, p.2).

As the above researchers highlight, the difficulties in defining ethical consumption are largely associated with the various, complicated and interactive, yet wide ranging nature of ethical consumption practices that may sometimes be incongruous. Such difficulties, to a large extent, are related to the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the formation of the concept of ethical consumption. Studies around the topic of ethical consumption have grown rapidly in number in the past three decades. When looking at these studies, the overall impression is that the majority are conducted from a positivistic view (Harrison et al., 2005). Rather counter intuitively perhaps, by applying a phenomenological hermeneutics perspective, there is the scope ‘sympathize’ with the difficulties in defining ethical consumption from a positivistic view. As ethical consumption is made of series of lived daily consumption experiences, it is therefore not easily to ‘reduce’ these to a ‘simplified and universal’ definition.

Fisher et al. (2009) indicates that the essential reason for defining a term is to communicate. Hence, despite the difficulties, definitions around ethical consumption have emerged in the literature. For example, O’Rourke (2006, p.291) stated: “ethical consumption is about taking the time to look beyond the clean, glossy packing to the background of what is presented, and making choices and purchases based on that knowledge”. Whilst this may not seem the most ‘academic’ definition, as a phenomenological hermeneutics researcher, I find that this ‘light-hearted’ yet detailed
descriptive presentation is far more attractive than other definitions. It conveys the experience of ethical consumption by using a series of simple verbs to bring this form of consumption experience to life. The informal tone makes it more approachable and associates it more firmly with consumers’ everyday consumption practice. Such a description reflects the phenomenological attitude and the essence of ethical consumption in consumers’ ordinary consumption practice. Among various definitions of ethical consumption in the marketing literature (for the sake of contrast, some of which are provided in the table below), the definition provided by O’Rourke (2006) is perhaps the closest to embodying a phenomenological hermeneutics perspective and – as such, it is the used in this research as the definition of choice.

If we move for a moment beyond the ‘description’ of ethical consumption provided in O’Rourke’s (2006) definition of ‘ethical consumption’, we can see that the actual subject is the ‘consumer’ and their choices. ‘Ethical consumption’ as a concept itself cannot ‘take the time to look beyond’ or to ‘make choices and purchases’; it is the ‘consumers’ that do so. Thus, such description establishes the role of consumers and their decision making in ethical consumption practice; in other words, it is about ‘buying’. To determine the meaning of ethical consumption in the literature solely based on this single description is however insufficient. As such, eight definitions are presented in the following table.

Table 1 Definitions of ethical consumption

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key concept: Ethical consumption</th>
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<tr>
<td>“An expression of the individual’s moral judgment in his or her purchase behaviour” (Smith, 1990, p. 178)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“The degree to which consumers prioritize their own ethical concerns when making product choices” (Shaw &amp; Clarke, 1998, p. 163)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Buying products which are not harmful to the environment and society. This can be as simple as buying free-range eggs or as complex as boycotting</td>
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<td>Key concept: Ethical consumption</td>
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<td>goods produced by child labour” (Harper &amp; Makatouni, 2002, p. 289)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices. Their choices are based on attitudes and values regarding issues of justice, fairness, or noneconomic issues that concern personal and family well-being and ethical or political assessment of favourable and unfavourable business and government practice.” (Micheletti, 2003, p. 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The conscious and deliberate decision to make certain consumption choices due to personal moral beliefs and values” (Crane &amp; Matten, 2004, p. 290)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Having political, religious, spiritual, environmental, social or other motivations for choosing one product over another” (Harrison et al., 2005, p. 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The conscious choice of particular products such as detergents low in bleach as well as the rejection of others such as purchasing gasoline from Esso because of the company’s approach to global warming” (Szmigin &amp; Carrigan, 2006, p. 609)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The act of purchasing products that have additional attributes (e.g., social, environmental, political, health, etc.) in addition to their immediate use-value, to signify (Long &amp; Murray, 2013)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The eight different definitions were created from 1990 to 2013. These various definitions whilst developed over more than two decades remain distinct. However, the emphasis in of all of the definitions is consistent: firstly, consumers’ obligations are brought to the fore and the role of individual consumers’ responsibilities are highlighted in their consumption actions; secondly, consumers’ decision making is emphasized through the consumption process, aspects other than those that are purchase related are largely neglected. Thirdly, although ‘morals, values and ethical concerns’ are mentioned within the definitions; the actual moral foundations supporting the various ethical consumption definitions are unclear. The discussions above lay out the definitions of the concept of ethical consumption – which
establishes the image of the trunk of the tree. The following sections gradually reveal the full image of the tree as a holistic entity.

2.2.2 Studies of ethical consumption

Another important way to gain understanding of the concept of ethical consumption is to review previous studies in the subject area. The gap between consumer’s ‘stated ethical intention’ and their consumption behaviour has challenged both academic researchers and practitioners in the field. For example, Cowe and Williams (2000) reported the ‘30:3 phenomenon’ from their large scale study in the UK, in which they found that about one third of consumers expressed care for ethical standards. However, only 3% of their purchasing behaviour reflects these stated ethical standards. Futerra (2005, p.92) suggests similar findings where 30% of consumers stated that they would purchase ethically, yet only 3% actually do so. Such a phenomenon in ethical consumption has been emphasized, yet different terms have been used to describe it, for instance, the intention-behaviour gap (Auger & Devinney, 2007; Belk et al., 2005; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001); attitude-behaviour gap (Devinney et. al., 2010; Kim et al., 1997); ethical purchasing gap (Nicholls & Lee, 2006).

Within in the field of ethical consumption, theory development is still in its early stages, and an established and widely accepted theoretical framework for understanding the decision making of ethical consumers is yet to be developed (Carrington et al., 2010, p.141). Many attempts have been made to explain the ‘gap’ between what consumers say and actually do in ethical purchasing behaviour. Although hundreds of studies have been conducted, no definitive explanation has been found (Bray et al., 2010; Carrington et al., 2010; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Various theoretical frameworks have been developed, modified and tested over the past decades, in order to address the issue. The pursuit of understanding of ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ also mirrors the theoretical development in ethical consumption studies - which can be categorized into three major groups: early linear models, the theory of planned behaviour model and the modified theory of planned behaviour models.
2.2.2.1 Early linear models

The early linear models were first used to understand environmentally friendly behaviour in the 1960s (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Although these models were not specifically designed to fit ethical consumption behaviour, they had significant impact on later theoretical development in the field. For example, Cotte (2009 cited by Devinney et al., 2010, p.54) pointed out that over 45% of academic research in the ethical consumer literature used a linear model, accounting for nearly 90% of all empirical research to date. These models were based on a linear progression that (environmental) knowledge can transform into (environmental) attitude, and in turn was thought to lead to (environmental) behaviour (in essence taking an implicitly consequentialist perspective). The following diagram is an example of such linear models.

![Diagram of linear model example]

Source: Kollmuss and Agyeman (2010, p.241)

Such a model indicates that the failure to engage in ethical consumption behaviour is a result of knowledge deficiency, which should be overcome by the provision of relevant communication. However, a substantial body of research suggests that influencing ethical consumption is not this simple (Prothero et al., 2011; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Hansen & Schrader, 1997). Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) point out that these models are entirely based on rationalist assumptions and that research into environmentally friendly behaviour found that increased knowledge and awareness of environmental concerns did not lead to environmental behaviour. Burgess et
al. (1998, p.1447) refer to these models as ‘deficit’ models of public understanding and action. The ineffectiveness of linear models led to the exploration of alternative theoretical frameworks and forged a new stage of consideration focused on decision making and is epitomized by the theory of planned behaviour.

2.2.2.2 Theory of planned behaviour

The most frequently used and modified models in understanding consumer decision making in ethical consumption are a theoretical framework based on the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1980) and the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2008; Chatzidakis et al., 2007; De Pelsmacker & Janssens, 2007; Ajzen, 1991). TRA and TPB were developed by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) and these theoretical frameworks have been regarded as the most influential attitude-behaviour models in social psychology, and they have provided theoretical guidance for many researchers (Carrington et al., 2010; Chatzidakis et al., 2006; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). As such, the majority of consumer behaviour models are built on the three core determinants: attitude, perception of social norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). In other words, TRA and TPB present a cognitive progression that: (1) beliefs determine attitudes, (2) attitudes lead to intentions and (3) intentions inform behaviour. In addition, social norms and behavioural control moderate intentions and behaviour (De Pelsmacker & Janssens, 2007). The TPB model is presented in the following figure.
The theory of planned behaviour has been widely applied to ethical consumption to understand the consumer decision making process (Bray et al., 2010; Carrington et al., 2010; Shaw et al., 2000). However, it has been suggested that purchase intention does not translate literally into purchase behaviour in the case of ethical consumption (Morwitz, Steckel & Gupta, 2007; Young, DeSarbo & Morwitz, 1998). With regard to this argument, Shaw (2005) suggests that although the theory of planned behaviour has been applied in a variety of behavioural domains and considered very useful, in the context of ethical consumption behaviour however, the limits of using the original theory of planned behaviour needs to be considered. They further pointed out that the original theory of planned behaviour has an exclusive focus on ‘self-interested’ concerns and that may limit application to ‘socially’ driven ethical consumption. Within ethical consumption as consumers’ concerns are fundamentally related to the social contexts in which they live, and the consumers should be understood as being-in-the-world, rather than as individuals with preferences independent of that world (Cherrier, 2005).

2.2.2.3 Modified theory of planned behaviour

To begin to address the issues with the use of the traditional theory of the planned behaviour model, Eagly and Chaiken (1993) suggest that a measure of ‘moral’ or ‘ethical obligation’ should be added, given that ethical variables
were neglected in the previous ethical consumer decision making studies (Shaw, 2005). Other researchers such as Sparks and Shepherd (1992), Granberg and Holmberg (1990), Sparks and Guthrie (1998) suggest incorporating a measure of ‘self-identity’ to modify the existing theory of planned behaviour. They support the notion that ethical concern is part of the ethical consumer’s self-identity and such identity is considered to be significant in explaining the intention to purchase ethically. Gorsuch and Ortberg (1983), Raats, Shepherd, and Sparks (1995) also indicate that adding measures can be useful to improve the explanation of intention-behaviour. A modified theory of planned behaviour has therefore been developed by Shaw, Shiu and Clarke (2000), by adding two measures to the original model: ‘ethical obligation’ and ‘self-identity’.
This model was applied to fair trade grocery shopping to understand each determinant's role in the explanation of intention to purchase a fair trade grocery product (Shaw et al., 2000). In a quantitative approach, survey data was used to test this model. Firstly, questionnaires were designed to elicit the salient beliefs underlying attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control and self-identity following the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbien, 1980). It is worth noting that ethical obligation has no underlying beliefs in this model, and is presented as one direct measure in the literature (Shaw, 2000).

The study results (Shaw, 2005) suggest that this modified model can only partially explain intention towards ethical behaviour; 76% of intentions remained unexplained - such results suggest there is a considerable limit to the application of the modified TPB. Despite this limitation, Shaw’s study (2005) improved the understanding of ethical consumer’s intention and behaviour, offering new insights when compared with traditional decision making models. Firstly, she suggests that ethical obligation is significant in explaining ethical purchasing intention and behaviour; secondly, she points out that self-identity is only significant when consumers already embody ethical issues as part of their self-identity. This means self-identity will not be
effective among consumers who lack an understanding of ethical issues; thirdly, she concludes that the theory of planned behaviour framework is ineffective in understanding the complexity and interrelationship in the context of fair trade purchasing. I favour Shaw’s conclusion that it is time to move away from the traditional theory of planned behaviour approaches due to its ineffectivity in understanding the complexities of ethical consumption behaviour; researchers should be encouraged to understand ethical purchasing behaviour from different perspectives.

2.2.2.4 Reflection on ethical consumption studies

‘[A]lthough hundreds of studies have been done, the myth of the ethical purchasing gap remained’ (Divinney et al., 2010). This is because the theoretical framework developed from early linear models and decision making models (e.g. TPB and the modified TPB) maintained the assumption that consumers are essentially rational, in that they ‘make systematic use of information available to them’, they are not controlled by unconscious motives, neither is their behaviour ‘capricious and thoughtless’ (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975, p.15). Ethical decision making is not made in a vacuum. However, previous studies often neglected the social aspects and that consumers are much more sophisticated and deliberate in incorporating social factors into their decision making (Divinney et al., 2010).

As an outcome of using of the theoretical frameworks discussed above, the research direction of ethical consumption has been pushed into a literal ‘gap’ – an ‘attitude-behaviour gap’. A group of scholars (e.g. Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Nicholls & Lee; 2006; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2010; Bray et al., 2011; Başgöze et al., 2012; Saleki et al., 2012) determined to identify the responsible factors to provide a basis to bridge this gap. Some provided a list of possible factors, for example, key/micro factors such as price sensitivity, personal experience, and ethical obligation, lack of information, quality perception, cynicism and guilt (Bray et al., 2011) and macro factors such as the impacts of globalization, national governments, transnational corporations, pressure groups/ social movements, technological change, market campaigns, the corporate accountability movement; and a shift in
market power towards consumers (Harrison, 2005); yet the attitude behaviour gap in consumers’ ethical consumption still appears not to have been closed.

This gap implies that the limitations of TPB in ethical consumption studies also provides methodological implications, for example the treatment of social desirability, which is considered as a bias that distorts measurement in ethical purchasing intentions, and which also helps to account for the ethical purchasing gap (Carrington et al., 2010; Auger & Devinney, 2007; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). Researchers such as Carrigan and Attala (2001) and Boulstridge and Carrigan (2000) also point out that a lack of research ‘validity’ in the field of ethical consumption contributes to the ‘attitude-behaviour’ gap. Their argument proposes that there are common methodological flaws in ethical consumption studies – primarily introduced by using self-administration surveys or questionnaires, which have a tendency to overstate the importance of factors that are associated with socially acceptable responses. As explained by Schwartz (1999) individuals may edit their personal judgement due to the considerations of social desirability and self-presentation.

2.2.3 An alternative logic in studying ethical consumption

Due to the ineffectiveness of linear models and traditional decision making models (e.g. TPB and modified TPB) in studying ethical consumer behaviour, an alternative logic – that of the recursive model of social consumption - was proposed (Devinney et al., 2010). Recursive models have previously been often used in studying social actions, yet there is a lack of application of this model within studies of ethical consumption. The figure below is an example of a recursive model used in understanding social action (Devinney et al., 2010, p.51). Unlike linear models and traditional decision making models, a recursive model has no absolute beginning or end, from reading the example model – we cannot gather which component is the core determinant.

However, the recursive model can stimulate understanding consumers’ behaviour in ethical consumption – as it offers flexibility in understanding consumer behaviour rather than a rigid model that contains a fixed number of
components and fixed predetermined logic as do such as linear models or traditional decision making models. The recursive model opens paths for more complicated interaction between the precursors, such as external context, that enable the incorporation of the social aspects and their influence on the consumer's actual behaviour (Devinney et al., 2010).

**Figure 6 A recursive model of social action**

*Source: Devinney et al. 2010 (p.51)*

This model represents two principal issues: the primary logic is that of an individual being in a context in which his/her emotions have been stimulated, or aroused, and this emotional change leads to an unconscious choice being made. This action further leads to information search to reconcile the unconscious decision made by the actor as a result of the external circumstances and the internal cognitive states. This process leads to a quasi-rational process that influences and/or triggers individuals' beliefs and values, which in turn shape the individual's behavioural intention. The second part of the logic is reflected in the feedback loops (the grey shaded arrows in the figure above), over time, when more decisions are made, the distinction between the individual's initial recognition, future rationalization
and current behaviour becomes muddied by the feedback loops that attempt to maintain a balance and continuity between the individual’s internal state, emotional state and external state (Devinney et al., 2010, p.52).

Devinney et al., (2010, p.52) state that one can question their proposed recursive model, but the main point raised is that ‘the direction of causality is not necessarily apparent or logical’. Previous consumer behaviour studies in the field of ethical consumption have been occupied for too long by a one-way-logic, and the complexity of consumption behaviour has largely been neglected. The recursive model does not underestimate the traditional decision models, or the function of values, beliefs and attitudes, but the argument is that ‘values are as likely to lead to a behaviour manifestation as behaviour is to lead by value manifestation’ (Devinney et al., 2010, p.53). The same is true of beliefs, attitude and intentions, which can guide action as well as be shaped by action.

Instead of assuming consumers are entirely rational and only make rational decisions, this goes beyond the limitation of traditional models, and views consumer decision making as a highly complicated two-way process, where the influential factors can be vested in a consumer’s core values and beliefs and can be factors from the situation and context, mood and emotions, or from external information and so on. This standing point gives researchers freedom and space to explore and understand ethical consumption behaviour without unnecessary limitations. Rather than being focused on the internal attitude-behaviour gap, the recursive model encourages examination of new possibilities – which could be one component or multiple components, depending on the specific study context.

2.2.4 Ethical consumption vs. ethical consumerism

In the marketing literature, the concept of ‘ethical consumption’ and ‘ethical consumerism’ are quite often being used without differential; yet there are some distinctions between these two concepts and there is a lack of clarity in the existing literature. On the one hand, a series of detailed definitions of ‘ethical consumption’ has been developed, as the above section explained. One the other hand, ‘ethical consumerism’ is perceived as “too broad in its
definition; too loose in its operation; and too moralistic in its stance to be anything other than a myth” (Devinney et al., 2010, p.9).

One perspective is that ‘ethical consumerism’ is a result of the development of ‘green consumerism’, emerging and forming in the late 1980s and early 1990s, initially regarded as being on the fringe, but now seen as a mainstream consumer movement (ICTU, 2009). Ethical consumerism has been greatly supported recently by the rise of consumer groups (Harrison et al., 2005), it is often regarded as an expression of ‘ethical concerns’ about products and organizations (Cho & Krasser, 2013). (The term ‘ethical concerns’ contains various considerations that will be further discussed in the section entitled ‘Ethical concerns’.)

Another perspective, according to ICTU (2016), is that ‘ethical consumerism’ is a type of consumer activism, that is built on the foundations laid by social activists in the 20th century. Its fundamental principles have remained relatively consistent - that is seeking to ensure fairness, social justice, equality and protection of the individual (ICTU, 2016, p.12). These principles of ‘consumer activism’ are quite often painted as striving to ensure value for money for those who consume, while protecting their interests and well-being, as well as those of workers involved in local, national and global supply chains. Ethical consumerism, as a type of consumer activism, is practiced by choosing to purchase products that meet certain ethical standards, or equally importantly by choosing not to purchase products that fail to meet those criteria (Cho & Krasser, 2013). Therefore, the ‘treatment’ of ethical consumption, is to minimise social and/or environmental damage (Institute of Grocery Distribution, 2013).

By comparing the definitions and dialogue around ‘ethical consumption’ and ‘ethical consumerism’; three distinctions can be made. Firstly, the notion of ‘ethical consumerism’ is largely abstract, it refers to the ideas and thinking behind the act of ‘ethical consumption’; whilst the concept of ‘ethical consumption’ is often used to associate with individual consumers’ particular and specific actions. This can be seen from the definitions of ‘ethical consumption’: “actions by people who make choices among producers and
products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices” (Harper & Makatouni, 2002, p.289). A similar definition is: “the act of purchasing products that have additional attributes (e.g., social, environmental, political, health, etc.) in addition to their immediate use-value, to signify” (Long & Murray, 2013). The above two definitions are examples that illustrate that the concept of ‘ethical consumption’ that is mainly concerned with specific consumption actions.

Secondly, ‘ethical consumerism’ is a much broader concept that is often be perceived as too broad to be defined (Devinney et al., 2010); whereas the concept of ‘ethical consumption’ is a narrowly defined concept that is exclusively concerned with product choices, for instance, choosing product A over B (as A is more ethical than B), or boycotting company C. Such concerns are vividly demonstrated by the Ethical Consumer magazine, which acts as a consumption guide to UK consumers (Valerio, 2016). This can also be observed from the following definitions of ethical consumption. “The conscious choice of particular products such as detergents low in bleach as well as the rejection of others such as purchasing gasoline from Esso because of the company’s approach to global warming” (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2006, p.609). And “the degree to which consumers prioritize their own ethical concerns when making product choices” (Shaw & Clarke, 1998. p.163).

The issues above can be extended to the third distinction, that the concept of ‘ethical consumption’ has been used and adopted as a marketing concept that is reflected in various ethical consumption marketing practices and logos (Harper & Makatouni, 2002). In essence, the concept of ethical consumption does not imply ‘less consumption’; it seems to suggest that “it’s okay to consume, as long as you buy ethically”. While the notion of ‘ethical consumerism’ is more a social concept, one that is founded on the notion of ‘consumerism’ as dealing with broad issues rather than exclusively focusing on marketing aspects. In other words, ‘ethical consumerism’ has become a popular ‘type’ of consumerism, a form of ‘consumer activism’ that undertaken on behalf of consumers, to assert ‘consumer rights’.
We can conclude that ‘ethical consumerism’ is initially rooted in ‘social activism’ and ‘consumer activism’. Over time, the concept of ‘ethical consumerism’ has been developed into a notion that shares a particular interest in consumption practice and its impact on society and environment. Whilst, the concept of ‘ethical consumption’ more precisely points to individual consumers purchasing behaviour, as the previous section indicated. It can also be observed that whilst connected, there is a perceptible shift in focus from ‘consumer activism; - concerns with the fundamental principles, to ‘ethical consumerism’ – which deals with the logic(s) of consumption within a particular social system; to ‘ethical consumption - focused on individual purchase choices. This movement progressively, from the position where a broader notion is narrowed to a more specific concept; in other words, it is a ‘reduction’ of focus.

2.2.5 An overview of consumerism and capitalism

‘Consumerism’ is a cross-disciplinary term that can be presented differently or even controversially from political, economic social and marketing perspectives. In the existing literature, there is no lack of definitions and discussions of ‘consumerism’. In Swagler’s publication Modern Consumerism (1997) alone, more than a handful of definitions are offered. Traditionally, the sense of ‘consumerism’ often refers to the efforts to support consumers’ interests; however, with the rapid expansion of ‘consumerism’, another sense has become predominant. This other meaning focuses on a ‘high level of consumption’ since the 1970s in capitalist economies. It is, agreed by many, that “capitalist consumer culture must always be excessive” (Carrington et al., 2016, p.22).

As such, the notion of ‘consumerism’ can be perceived as having two faces. On the one hand, a positive face that can be associated with economic growth: and that is embodied in economic indicators such as GDP (Gross Domestic Product), M2 (Money Supply) and CPI (Consumer Price Index) (AAII, 2003). On the other hand, a negative face that can be linked to ‘social ills’ such as climate change, resulting from the driving forces of capitalist consumer culture (James & Szeman, 2010). The rapid development of
contemporary ‘consumerism’ can be seen as the outcome of the growth of ‘capitalism’, or as John Bugas in 1995, suggested ‘consumerism’ is a substitute for ‘capitalism’ to better describe the American economy (Eriksson, 2012).

In addition to the above discussions, I would like to add my personal perspective on ‘consumerism’ – which can also be described as part of my ‘culture shock’ experiences. I had heard about ‘Good Friday’; but ‘Black Friday’ was certainly something new to me. ‘Black Friday’ is the day following Thanksgiving Day in the United States and this day has been viewed as the beginning of the Christmas shopping season. It has been a tradition in the U.S. that retailers offer extended shopping hours and provide promotional sales since 1932. The first time, ‘Black Friday’ caught my attention was 28th November 2014 in the UK, when the BBC News reports were filled with images of mass hysteria as people swarmed into shops to get discounted goods; to the extent that there were people injured in the shopping rush and in some instances the police had were called to restore the order in store. This day was described as ‘a national disgrace’ by Valerio (2016).

The above ‘Black Friday’ experience was only a miniature of overall contemporary ‘consumerism’. However, this single day event very much mirrors that the consumption is seen as a driving force of capitalism, and this force is both potentially pervasive and irresistible – and can even result in physical injury to those caught up in it. Metaphorically, such injury can also be viewed as a ‘social injury’ that besets contemporary society. In terms of the large-scale impacts of ‘consumerism’, the planet is thus also negatively influenced: climate change, environment degradation and the ‘80:20’ phenomenon where over 80% of the world’s population lives in the Third World. While the rich of the world continue to consume resources (such as oil and metals) and produce waste (such as plastics and greenhouse gases) at a rate of 32 units per capita, the poor consume at a rate of 1 unit per capita (Daly et al., 2006).

Many of the ambitious critiques then point to the role of ‘consumerism’, which is viewed as the cultural expression of ‘capitalism’ (Fornas, 2013; Zick Vaulr,
2013). From a classical critical theory perspective – “consumption desires represent the false needs the system produces to chain us to an endless process of self-creation and actualization through consumption” (Carrington et al., p.22). As Žižek (1993, p.212) says: “if we subtract need from demand, we get desire.” As such, it leads to the conclusion that “capitalism’s destructiveness is sustained by creating an excess of demand that is never satisfied by the system, despite expanding production capacity and efficiency” (Carrington et al., p.22).

‘Ethical consumerism’, as a form of consumer activism, is one form of response, a ‘treatment’ for the perceived ‘social ills’ caused by excessive consumerism under the capitalist mechanism, under which a broad sweep of problems emerged such as ‘environmental degradation, exploitative labour conditions, social and economic iniquity, and mental and physical illness’ (Carrington et al., 2016). The ideology of ‘ethical consumerism’ therefore can be viewed as a corrective response to take the ‘excessive consumerism’ back to the track of ‘consumerism’ to ensure that “marketplace itself is responsible for ensuring social justice through fair economic practices (Mahajan, 2015, p245)” – the way consumerism is ‘ideally’ supposed to be is the underlying presumption.

2.3 Moral philosophies

Alongside the development of the complicated issues around ethical consumption, there is a need to look beyond the surface of these phenomena and address something more fundamental – its roots. The quest for the underpinnings of ethical consumption often results in consideration of the discourse around moral philosophy. For instance, Barnett, Cafaro and Newholm (2005) point out that moral philosophy can be useful in understanding and evaluating ethical consumption issues and consumers’ ethical consumption behaviour. ‘Consequentialism’ and ‘deontology’ are regarded as the two major philosophical approaches in understanding ethical consumption issues in the Western literature – there are significant distinctions between consequentialism and deontology that can be boiled down to the debate over the ‘good’ and the ‘right’ (Barnett et al., 2005). Thus,
it is helpful to consider the moral foundations of the concept of ethical consumption through the discussion of these two major moral philosophies.

2.3.1 Consequentialism

Consequentialists privilege the ‘good’, in which the outcomes or sequences of actions are of central concern (Barnett et al., 2005; Pettit, 1991). These approaches are also referred as ‘teleological’ as they start by specifying an end (or telos) in relation to moral obligations (Barnett et al., 2005, p.12). Peter Singer is an important contemporary philosopher who employs consequentialism and applies it to ethical issues (Barnett et al., 2005). For example, he advocates animal welfare concerns in relation to meat eating and the wearing of fur or leather (Singer, 1997); his advocacy of environmental ethics suggests that people avoid unnecessary harm to the environment and sentient creatures; he additionally points out that wealthy Western consumers should help the world’s poor (Singer, 2002).

Singer’s (1997) argument is that consumption is associated with the conspicuous and extravagant display of social action; this argument offers an influential template in understanding the relationships between ethics and consumption (Barnett et al., 2005). From such a point of view, the importance of simplicity and frugality in consumption were highlighted, and high levels of consumption are recognised as a major problem in modern societies, and an unjustified ‘using up of the world’ (Singer, 1997, pp.45-46). Interestingly, not much of the consequent notion of ‘good’ is reflected in the concept of ethical consumption - considerations for environment, animals and the world’s poor have simply been translated into particular ethical consumption practices that are still focused on purchase, rather than frugality or simplicity per se.

Thus, the emphasis on a simplifying, frugality and reducing the overall level of consumption is largely absent in the mainstream Western concept of ethical consumption. This is evident in the fact that definitions of ethical consumption that mainly focus on “what to buy” rather than “if it’s necessary to buy at all”. For example, the idea of purchasing fair trade chocolate is encouraged by the notion of ethical consumption, as if, by changing
consumer behaviour from the purchasing conventional chocolate to a chocolate with fair-trade logo the third world’s coco farmers’ problems then can be solved – in essence through consumers’ help. Consequentialism has raised not only moral issues but also practical concerns in relation to consumption that go beyond narrowly focused ethical purchasing choices, yet such an approach conflicts with the deontology approach.

2.3.2 Deontology

Deontological approaches privilege ‘right’, focusing on the principle of honour (Pettit, 1991; Barnett et al., 2005). ‘Right’ is regarded as independent of its contribution to human happiness or other preferred goals. John Rawls’s publication (1972) of *A Theory of Justice* has played an important role in deontological approaches. He argues that consequentialists assume that the collective choices of society are always consistent with an individual’s choice, and therefore, this limits or neglects an individual’s rights. He further emphasizes that ‘the right is over the good’; collective good should not traduce an individual’s basic liberties (Barnett et al., 2005, p.13). This reveals the major conflict between consequentialism and demonology - the emphasis on the collective and that of individual benefits.

Deontological approaches also address people’s responsibility to care for ‘others’, such as other humans, the environment, animals and future generations, in a highly universalized manner (Barnett et al., 2005). From this point of view, it may seem that consequentialist and deontological approaches are very similar. However, a specific example in ethical consumption practice helps to illustrate the fundamental difference between the two. In terms of products made by child labour, deontologists would refuse to purchase such products as this is against the principles of moral rules - ‘to be against the exploitation of children’; thus it is not ‘right’ to purchase a product made by child labour. As can be observed, such logic is strongly present in the Western concept of ethical consumption, and is evident in similar ethical concerns such as concerning working conditions and animal welfare.
Thus, we can conclude that the Western concept of ethical consumption is largely influenced by a deontological right-based approach. However, from a consequentialist’s perspective - which highlights the dilemma that an important source of income might be reduced and children’s conditions worsened by deontologists’ action - it is not ‘good’ to worsen the child’s situation (Meiklejohn, 1998). Consequentialists would purchase a product made by child labour, since not to do so would cause more harm. They might hope trade conditions can be improved in the long-term, but are faced with the questions of when they should withdraw such behaviour and if purchasing such products would result in encouraging the usage child labour.

2.3.3 Moral foundation of the Western concept of ethical consumption and its specific concerns

Through the above discussions, it is evident that the Western concept of ethical consumption is largely based on the deontological approach, where ‘right’ is privileged over ‘good’. However, the concept of ethical consumption contains a wide range of ethical issues and concerns and each of these may relate to those principles differently. The gateway to understanding the importance of the moral foundations of the concept of ethical consumption is in its definitions, as it can be observed that its definitions highlight the importance of ‘ethical concerns’. For instance, Shaw and Clarke (1998, p.163) define ethical consumption as ‘the degree to which consumers prioritize their own ethical concerns when making product choices’. However, there is a need to clarify the moral foundations of each ‘ethical concern’ to obtain a more detailed understanding of the ‘ethical consumption’ concept.

The consideration of ethical concerns has evolved considerably with the development of marketing ethics as a distinct field of interest. Thirty years ago, Smith (1990) highlighted that concern for the environment (e.g. green consumerism) was the only significant stream of ethical consumption examined in marketing research. This single stream has now evolved into a notion that incorporates more broad matters of conscience (Carrigan et al., 2004), such as no animal testing or animal cruelty free, anti-child labour, labour’s working conditions or sweatshop free, local, organic and fair trade.
produce (Auger & Devinney, 2007; Fraj & Martinez, 2007; Carrigan, Szmigin & Wright, 2004; Crane, 2001; Strong, 1996).

Unlike the definition of ethical consumption, which is pervaded by controversial debates, ethical concerns are (perhaps) more commonly agreed upon – and have been divided into three major categories: environmental concerns; animal welfare and human rights (The Co-operative ethical consumer market report, 2012; Carrigan et. al., 2004; ECRA, 1997). Each concern contains more detailed considerations and each consideration can be associated with certain consumption practices. The following sections take a closer look at each individual ethical concern and try to understand its origins and what its moral foundation is.

2.3.3.1 Environmental concerns – as social justice

Environmental concerns are often expressed using different terms in the marketing literature, such as sustainable consumption, green consumption, green purchasing behaviour, environmental behaviour and eco-friendly purchasing behaviour (Başgöze & Tektaş, 2012; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2010; McDonald, Oates, Thyne, Alevizou & McMoral, 2009; Chan, 2001). Wanger (2002) suggests this type of consumption concern involves adopting attitudes and behaviours that are designed to minimize the outcomes of one’s personal purchasing, ownership, use or disposal of products on the environment. This reflects the position that environmental concerns emphasize the interaction between humans (at the level of individual first, and then collectively) and the environment.

In ethical consumption practices, environmental concerns are most often associated with green consumption (Başgöze et al., 2012; Moisander, 2007). As evidence of this, one of the very first ‘green’ products on the supermarket shelves was eco-friendly detergents in 1980 (Arnold, 2009). Today, goods and services associated with green consumption can be found in almost all product categories, such as food and beverages, electronics, technology, clothing, buildings, hotels and vehicles – such products are commonly highlighted by terms such as natural, recycled, organic, local produce, environmentally friendly, non-genetically modified, energy-saving and
biodegradable (Saleki et al., 2012; Ball, Rowson & O’Toole 2008). An
increased product range may, in part, also be responsible for the overall
sales growth of organic products, which increased from £225 million to over
£1500 million from 1995 to 2011 (Soil Association, 2012). This growth also
suggests a degree of ‘mainstreaming’, with larger numbers of households
potentially participating in some ‘green’ consumption as a way to express
their environmental concerns.

There is a shift of focus from the first to the second paragraph in this section,
although the discussion remains around environmental concern. The focus of
environmental concerns has been narrowed, initially from the broader view of
environmental concerns that considers consumption as an entire process to
a reduced view that exclusively focuses on the ‘product’ categories and
choices that are given to consumers and the selection of which product to
purchase. Such a shift vividly demonstrates the ‘focus’ of concept of ethical
consumption – it is exclusively concerned with consumption choices and
‘empowers’ the consumers to make decisions and make changes through
their consumption behaviours.

Given this focus on selection it is important to understand the logic of
environmental concerns and the association with a particular environmentally
friendly product. For instance, this can be seen in how consumers are
informed about products: factory-farmed beef requires twice as much fossil
fuel energy input as pasture-reared beef (Pimentel, 2004). As such, pasture-
reared animals that receive a significant portion of their nutrition from
organically managed pasture and stored dried forages become a more
‘ethical’ choices compared with factory-farmed animals. The consumers are
then faced with the choice to purchase the factory-farmed or the organically
grown beef – the latter option though often requires them to pay more. This
pattern that environmental responsible products cost more can be seen at a
larger scale as ‘green’ products cost about 44% more than the standard
alternative (The Telegraph, 2010).

As a result, the responsibility of caring for environment has then ultimately
been passed to the consumers’ wallet. The concept of ethical consumption
can thus be viewed as one that is tailored to consumers. Business offers both conventional choices and ‘ethical’ alternatives; the choice as to which to purchase appears completely up to the consumers - how they make a decision and what they purchase is based on their personal morality and their financial ability. The consumers are rendered as powerful, able to make a change through their daily consumption behaviour, and such an idea is expressed as ‘empowerment’ by (Shaw et al., 2006). The concept of consumer empowerment mirrors the maturing notion of consumer rights; a notion that suggests that the consumer has the right to make their decisions and use their power to contribute to the protection of the environment.

‘Environmental’ concerns enable consumers to participate in actions of protection for the planet. However, it also needs to be remembered that such participation is largely ‘moderated’ through companies. What access consumers have to ‘environmentally conscious products’, is the remit of these organizations – and thus a good measure of the responsibility is also within the control of the businesses, as much as it is the responsibility of consumers. Scammell (2003) points out that there has been “a tilt in market power from producer to consumer… [over]…the last thirty or so years” (p. 7). The term consumer empowerment is full of dynamism, passion and energy; it rests on access to choice, information and awareness of consumer rights and means of redress (EU Consumer Policy Strategy, 2010). The essence of consumer empowerment is to galvanize the active role of being a consumer – even if that is within the confines of the choices presented by producers.

2.3.3.2 Animal welfare as fairness, equality and social justice

Animal welfare issues have gained considerable attention in the Western world (especially in Sweden, Belgium, German, UK, and USA). In recent decades, there has been growing consideration of the treatment of farm animals due to changes in production practices, as well as changes in the nature of animal use (Rollin, 1990, 1995, 2004). Such dramatic changes have raised the questions such as how animals should be treated and some more fundamental questions regarding ‘human and animal’ relationships - there has been an increasing controversy and debate over this topic. Thus,
there is no unified response on such topics, the position taken often depends on the belief that one holds, and can be related to religious ideas (Animal Ethics, 2009).

The influence of religious perspectives is reflected in the debates around meat-eating. For example, vegetarianism is strongly linked with Indian-originated religions such as Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism. However, by comparison, in Abrahamic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, vegetarianism is not promoted by the majority positions, although in all these faiths too there are groups that actively promote vegetarianism on religious grounds (Walters & Portmess, 2001). The fundamental differences between religious views that promote vegetarianism and those that do not are grounded on their perception of human and animal relationships. For example, Buddhists treat the lives of human and non-human animals with equal respect, as the doctrine of the ‘right livelihood’ teaches Buddhists to avoid any work connected with the killing of animals, and the doctrine of karma teaches that any wrong behaviour will have to be paid for in a future life - so cruel acts to animals should be avoided, as the Buddhist scriptures writes:

“All living things fear being beaten with clubs. All living things fear being put to death. Putting oneself in the place of the other. Let no one kill nor cause another to kill.”
(Dhammapada 129)

In contrast, in Christianity for example, although animals and humans are seen as having the same origin in God (e.g. St. Francis of Assisi), leading Christian thinkers, such as Aquinas, point out that animals were created to be used by human beings and animals do not have the ability to reason, and are therefore inferior to human beings. This school of taught holds that the universe is a hierarchy with God at its zenith, each layer in the hierarchy exists to serve the layers above it, humanity comes above the animals, so animals exist to serve humankind (BBC religions, 2009). The above
discussion highlights the divergent religious positions that can exist in relation to animal and human relationships.

Even when moving away from the religious debates, discourse around animal welfare is not simple. ‘Animal welfare comprises the state of the animal’s body and mind, and the extent to which its nature is satisfied’ (Appleby 1999a; Duncan & Fraser 1997; Fraser 1995). The concept of animal welfare is regarded as complex as it contains three central elements in its definition. The first element focuses on the body and the physical environment of the animal (Broom 2001); secondly, it expresses animal welfare in terms of animals' feelings and emotions (Dawkins 2006; Duncan 1996); thirdly, it provides an emphasis on the animal living in a fashion that renders its intrinsic characteristics fulfilled (Kiley-Worthington 1989; Rollin 1981). These conceptions are subjective and closely associated with personal values; for example, an individual’s perception of if an animal ‘feels good’ can be very different from person to person. This subjectivity and the necessity to rely on humans to ‘judge’ the experiences and feeling of the animal, provide much scope for debate and differences of opinion.

This aside, in recent years, there has been an increasing number of consumer behaviour studies relating to animal welfare, such as food consumption, apparel choices, skin care product purchasing (Sneddon, Lee, & Soutar, 2010; Vanhonacker, Verbeke, Poucke, Pieniak, Nijs & Tuyttens, 2010; Toma, McVittie, Hubbard & Stott, 2009; Liljenstolpe, 2008). Increases in the ‘practice’ of animal welfare are mirrored in the growth of related literature, and animal welfare in the market place is consistently promoted. This includes a wide range of practice – for instance in the food industry, organic animal husbandry (e.g. eggs, meat, milk and honey) and free-range (e.g. eggs and meat) labels are commonly found in the market.

The fashion and apparel industry also demonstrate an increasing awareness of animal welfare. For example, considerations associated with sheep welfare have encouraged the use of alternative materials for wool, such as cotton or synthetic material. Brands such as H&M and Hugo Boss have reduced the number of wool products they bring to market to reflect such
consideration (Arnold, 2009). Personal care products also highlight that they are ‘cruelty-free’ or ‘animal-friendly’ and it is generally understood within the animal rights movement that these terms mean that the product has not been tested on animals by the manufacturer (Lin, 2013). Logos such as ‘no animal testing’ and ‘no animal extract’ are commonly seen on personal care products, and some brands have been founded on this basis - such as The Body Shop, which emphasizes the usage of ethical sources and avoids doing anything harmful to animals (Lin, 2013).

We can observe from the notion of ethical consumption and its practice that ‘animal welfare’ is not directly attached to a specific religious position, although it might have been influenced by them; the practice of animal welfare is not unified – it is represented by different levels of ‘caring’, at one extreme being vegan or vegetarian or as a meat-eater purchasing organically farmed and free-range products. Although, different views and different actions can be associated with animal welfare concerns, there is there is a common precept that links perspectives and practices - the moral foundation of animal rights. This is the expression of equality and fairness, that it is important to be kind to animals and that it is imperative to avoid any unnecessary mistreatment. By engaging with and making choices that reflect animal welfare consumers’ can be seen as displaying a sense of fairness, equality and social justice.

2.3.3.3 Human rights as equality, fairness, social justice, and protection of individuals

Human rights can be a very broad term; issues within ethical consumption regarding human rights are closely associated with business ethics and ethical business is also referred to as socially responsible business (Dickson & Eckman, 2008). Littrell and Dickson (1999, p.6) provide a specific definition of social responsibility that ‘involves a system-wide range of practices for conducting business in which [producers], retailers, and consumers make decisions based on how their actions affect others within the market system.’ Although this definition was derived in relation to the apparel industry, it is also applicable other areas of consumption. The ‘concern for human rights’
can be reflected in a continuum of practices, such as providing fair wages, assuring a safe work-place, and avoiding the use of child labour (Dickson & Eckman, 2008; Shaw et. al, 2006; Hartman & Wokutch; 2003; Shaw & Clarke, 1999).

Fair trade is often used as an affirmative example to demonstrate the positive effects of practicing ethical consumption. It is viewed as a practice assuring equitability and fairness to producers and suppliers. The impacts of fair trade can be reflected in its growing market, such as in the UK (Co-operative Bank report, 2012). Fair trade products are those purchased under equitable trading agreements, involving co-operative rather than competitive trading principles, and ensuring a fair price and fair working conditions for producers and suppliers (Shaw et al., 2006). According to Arnold’s ethical shopping survey (2009), ‘fair trade’ is perceived as the strongest ethical label among all supermarket products, even stronger than environmental labels. Sales of fair trade products have doubled over the past five years in Europe and the U.S., with the UK leading the market (Arnold, 2009). Fair trade labels can be found on over 3000 products from tea and coffee to fruit juices and wine, bananas to chocolate, sugar and nuts; according Arnold (2009), it helps to support 7.5 million workers and producers in over 60 developing countries.

Chocolate is recognized as one of most common products associated with the Fair Trade logo. UK consumers are offered a wide range of choices of chocolate bars, so it is interesting to look into how the concept of ‘ethical consumption’ and fair trade is practised in chocolate consumption. A good place to investigate is the Ethical Consumer Magazine, as suggested by Valerio (2016). The magazine provides detailed information and carefully compares all the different makers and their chocolate bars. It publishes online the ‘Ethical Consumer Shopping Guide’, which covers most consumer goods. This shopping guideline includes: ethical and environmental ratings for 101 chocolate bars, best buy recommendations, child labour in the cocoa industry, palm oil and genetic modification (Ethical Consumer, 2016). By viewing the guide, consumers can easily find out the ‘best’ and ‘worst’ chocolate companies, and the rating sores based on the criteria as
mentioned above. Ethical Consumer, as a magazine, claims that it has been researching and recording the social and environmental records of companies since 1989, and sharing this information with consumers in a simple format.

Ethical Consumer’s guides offer information about the products that are not often fully revealed on the product’s packing; in this sense, their guides provide transparency to consumers. However, ethical shopping guides can also be said to have limited scope – they are exclusively concerned with purchase choices. By focusing on product choice, and identifying those that are seen as ‘ethical’, it seems justify consumption behaviour, and as such the issue is simply making product choices, rather than wider concerns such as if to consume at all. Referring back to the Fair Trade chocolate bar, the notion is that ethical consumption is practised by the consumer in purchasing ethically made chocolate; by choosing fair trade chocolate, the consumer becomes ethical, someone who helps and supports the third world cocoa farmers. Fair Trade has thus become a solution to many consumers, as a response by wealthy Western consumers [who] should help the world’s poor (Singer, 2002).

Alongside fair trade, concerns for employees are also well reflected in the fashion and apparel industry. The anti-sweatshop movement reminds consumers, for example, that the garments they purchase may have been made by exploited labour in sweatshops. For example, Lee (2013) suggests that American Apparel is a successful retail example of the practising of guidance on social responsibility - as all their clothing uses only U.S.-based materials and labour, and customers are able to trace the origins of the products (Lee, 2013). This vertically integrated company knows that part of its notable success over the past decade is due to its promise to keep what it produces “made in America” (Lee, 2013). In this case, concerns for ‘human rights’ in ethical consumption - from the seeking of equality and fairness, protection of individual worker - are resolved by trusting in US-based material and labour. This hen becomes manifest in the logo of ‘made in America’, however for some this has also ultimately found expression in the mantra– “boycott China, buy American” (Clawson, 2008).
The ethical concerns for ‘human rights’ originate from the moral principles of fairness, equality, protection of the individuals and social justice. However, in marketing practice these ethical concerns have demonstrated a degree of reduction from the original starting principles – resulting in a more limited focus. Although human rights as above discussed is a complicated issue relating to multiple stakeholders in the marketing system, ‘human rights’ within ethical consumption debates has largely become the responsibilities of the consumers. It has been reduced to the purchase ‘fair-trade’, ‘anti-sweatshop’; anti-child labour, ‘made in America’ products. The premise of this concern can then be summarized by the statement that as long as the consumers purchases certain logos, they are ‘ethical’ and contribute to social justice.

2.3.3.4 Summary- ‘virtue ethics’ the missing element

From the discussion above of each ethical concern and its moral foundations, we can conclude that the notion of ethical consumption and the practice of ethical consumption, are largely funded on the principles of consumer activism, seeking to ensure fairness, social justice, equality and protection of the individual. Those principles provided moral base for notion of ethical consumption, which is consistent with deontology moral philosophies. In essence, the notion of ethical consumption reflects a rights-based moral position where consumers are empowered, they have the right to make decisions and make changes through their consumption actions. The premise of rights can be extended to animals - giving animals ‘rights’ that requires fair treatment and care; employees also have the ‘right’ to receive fair wages and appropriate working conditions, even the environment metaphorically has ‘rights’ that need to be treated with a sense of fairness and justice.

From the detailed investigation of ethical concerns and ethical consumption practice, it seems that certain ‘principles’ and ‘rights’ have become predominant in consumers’ decision making in relation to ethical consumption. However, this is perhaps an over simplification. Swanton (2003) suggests that virtue ethics is very important in moral philosophy as an
alternative to the principle-based deontology or outcome-orientated consequentialism. Virtue ethics is considered as a good philosophical approach in relation to understanding ethics in consumption as it considers the relationships between individual actions, consumption and the broader conceptions of a good life (Barnett et al., 2005). In other words, virtue ethics emphasizes personal excellence, societal flourishing and the methods to achieve these (Barnett et al., 2005). However, within the treatment of ethical concerns within an ethical consumption approach, the virtue aspect, such as living simply and frugality, has been largely neglected (Singer, 2002).

Virtue theories specify virtues that are thought to be significant in human flourishing, such as justice, compassion, tolerance, courage, patience, persistence, intelligence, imagination and creativity (Cafaro, 2004; Foot, 2001). Virtue theorists respect people’s habits and daily practice, and they believe that the virtues can be learned and practised in people’s daily lives and this is also applicable in consumption. For example, faced with a concern about child labour, consumers are advised by virtue theorists to be compassionate and generous (Barnett et al., 2005). Virtue ethics does not offer specific action guide such as ‘boycott’ products made by child labour or support child labour to ensure that their income source remains. The simple suggestion is rather to be compassionate and generous, which requires consumers be given the space and freedom to make a decision based on the context. Therefore, rather than universal benevolence, the morality of virtue ethics is combined with personal caring and caring about others in general (Barnett et al., 2005).

To illustrate this point further, it is necessary to imagine how virtue ethics works in an individual’s everyday consumption. If an individual takes into account ethical concerns by negotiating practical concerns about product choices; then the basic concerns - for example, value for money, quality, safety and so on - should be understood as a set of presupposed ethical competencies; these ethical competencies are referred to as the habitual dimensions of consumption practice (Hobson, 2003). In other words, when this set of presupposed ethical competencies is not present, this would reduce the occurrence of the ethical concerns described in the above
literature review. However, the Western concept of ethical consumption often tends to neglect the virtue ethics' perspective, by opposing 'ethical consumption' to 'conventional consumption'; by isolating certain consumers and calling them “ethical consumers” to differentiate them from ‘ordinary’ [un-ethical] consumers.

As Miller (1998) points out, the individual consumer’s consumption is associated with his/her values and as a means of expressing concerns and care (for self and others). The purchase of organic foods and non-GM foods are good examples of consumers combining their self-interest (e.g. health concerns) and care for others (e.g. environment, animal welfare). Campbell (1998, pp.151-152) also argues that ‘both self-interest and idealistic concerns are involved in consumerism.’ Ethical consumption, therefore, cannot be simply divided as ‘ethical’ or ‘unethical’ or extricated directly from one social and cultural context to another, but needs to be understood through consumption practice embedded with consumers who live in that specific cultural context. The ethical values or ‘moral’ aspects of consumption are determined by individuals and the society they live in (Devinney et al., 2010). Thus, it is necessary to consider the Chinese context to be able to appreciate the cultural roots in understanding the meanings of ethical consumption among the Chinese consumers. Simple transposition of values and concerns from the Western literature and context would represent an inappropriate basis to consider ethical consumption in a Chinese context.

2.4 Culture: culture and consumption

“Culture, arguably the most abstract construct affecting human behaviour, extends its silent, yet powerful, influence on individual’s values, beliefs, cognitions, perceptual acuities, and behaviour.” (Wajda, Hu & Cui, 2007, p.50)

Addressed in almost all fields of social science, the construct of culture has been perceived and defined in numerous ways. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) found there were more than one hundred definitions of culture provided by cultural anthropologists alone. Herskovits (1955) offers the following definition: “culture is the man-made part of the human environment
that can be segregated into objective culture (e.g. objects such as tools) and subjective culture (e.g. beliefs, values and attitudes).” Keesing (1981) defines culture in a similar manner, stating that culture is a shared knowledge system that determines what a person should know or believe in order to operate in a manner considered acceptable. He further suggests that such a knowledge system imprints models on an individual’s mind to perceive, relate, and interpret the outside world. Similarly, according to Rohner (1984), culture is the totality of learned meaning maintained by a group of people transmitted from one generation to the next.

Triandis (1989, p.511) draws an analogy: “culture is to society what memory is to the person”. I found this expression particularly attractive, it not only conveys meanings but also creates mood that connects with people and establishes a deep bond in interpreting the meanings (Van Den Hengel, 1982). Underlying all these similar, yet slightly different definitions, is common agreement that culture signifies shared elements that provide the norms for perceiving, evaluating, communicating, and behaving amongst a group of people who share a language, a history, and/or a geographic location (Shweder & Levine, 1984; Triandis, 1989). Therefore, culture provides a repertoire of information that constantly refers to the purpose of adaptation and adoption of one’s behaviour (Wajda et al., 2007).

“However, in these increasingly global times, consumers have not been created equal” (Wajda, Hu & Cui, 2007, p.49). This can be reflected in the notion of ethical consumption itself. Ethical consumption, as popularized in the West, concerns such issues such as ‘animal welfare’ – one of the key messages is to promote the idea that products should avoid testing on animals –often expressed as ‘no animal testing’ or ‘cruelty free’. However, such concern is not applicable in the Chinese context at present, as it is required by law to conduct certain product safety tests on animals in China. Another example is the notion of fair trade, a concept that is more pertinent for wealthy Western consumers. This last example also serves as a reminder of the unequal status of consumers worldwide, and that what is appropriate in one location is not necessary applicable in a different situation.
The study of sociological and cultural influences on individual consumer behaviour has been particularly addressed during recent decades. It has been widely recognized that consumers from different socio-cultural backgrounds often think, emote, and consequently, behave in ways different from one another (Wajda et al., 2007). For example, in a comparative study by Wajda, et al., (2007) they suggested that cultures indeed impact on individuals’ consumption motivations; Chinese consumers are very different from U.S. consumers as they associate more with a culture that favours an interdependent self-construal, while U.S. consumers widely adopt an independent self-construal approach.

Gao (2013) also points out the importance of culture in understanding consumer behaviour. McCracken (2005) says that consumption, in its essence, is a process of sign manipulation, identity construction, and magic making. This means that consumption is deeply embedded in broader social, political and economic contexts, so that the meaning of consumption practice is never fixed but is rather contested by different agents and evolves over time. For instance, a study by Gao (2013) explored the Chinese discourse on McDonald’s between 1978 and 2013. The study findings argued that the evolving meaning of brand and consumption closely reflect the complex and changing nature of China’s political and economic structure. This conclusion accords with Murray’s (2002) view that consumers both constitute, and are constituted by, cultural values as well as by the larger cultural context.

However, the issue of cultural difference within the subject of ethical consumption has not been given much attention. The definitions of ethical consumption were developed in the Western literature, and thus mainly present a Western perspective without appreciating the potentially different meanings of ethical consumption in other cultural contexts. There is a tendency among researchers to directly transplant the Western concept into ethical consumption studies in an Asian context. This demonstrates a lack of sensitivity, which researchers at the broader level of consumption (e.g. McCracken, 2005; Gao, 2013), see as essential in understanding consumers.
In other words, key concepts such as ethical consumption and ethical concerns have been directly applied in studies of non-Western contexts without firstly asking if the Western perspective is fully understood and well-accepted. For example, a survey into ethical consumption set in China conducted by Deng (2014), reported a gap between Chinese consumers’ ethical consumption intentions and their behaviour, this is consistent with Western literature. However, I argue that it is naïve to make such a conclusion and there is a need to first reappraise the meaning of ethical consumption among Chinese consumers, as studying ethical choice without explicitly considering the cultural context is largely unrealistic (Belk et al., 2005).

Although ethics is itself viewed as a universal human trait, standards that guide ethicality differ from society to society (Abdur & Hwee, 2002). Each society has its own form of government, socio-economic and legal conditions, values, standards of moral and ethical behaviour and priorities. These diverse factors work differently in different societies (Abdur & Hwee, 2002). Singer (2002, cited by Barnett et al., 2005, p.12) suggests that there should not be restrictions in the scope of ethical concerns and the judgements of actions should always depend on the contextual factors. Thus, this leads to my conclusion that when studying ethical consumption in a non-Western cultural context, it is first crucial to ask if the Western concept of ethical consumption resonates within the study context.

2.5 Chinese cultural values: searching for the suitable term

China is regaining its position as a major economic and political power on the global stage. Such rapid development as has been seen in the past two decades raises questions surrounding the moral resources on which this nation can draw in order to meet its own challenges, as well as the common challenges faced by humankind. However, there is no simple answer for the question as to what are the contemporary Chinese cultural values? A number of scholars’ point to the vital role of traditional Confucian ideas (Fan, 2010; Sim, 2007; Yu, 2007). For thousands of years, Confucius has been
viewed as a touchstone of China's traditional culture, as well as the country's intellectual tradition and its collective wisdom.

However, the Confucian tradition, since its birth during the Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history (551-479 BC), has developed and flourished; it has also been abandoned and restored. In particular, the Confucian tradition was put in disarray by a series of dramatic events in 20th century China, ranging from the collapse of the last Chinese dynasty ‘Qing’ in 1911; through to the May fourth Movement in 1919 and to the cultural revolution from 1966 to 1976. As a consequence, there has been a separation of the contemporary Chinese cultural values from its traditional root.

In 2007, the Chinese government officially sponsored the reverence of Confucius on the sage’s birthday and broadcast the event across China through China Central Television (CCTV). As Lam (2008) observed, this was one of the events that signify Confucianism has "re-entered" the public domain in China during the post-reform era. Politically and culturally, there is a trend of revisiting the Confucian classics. This can also be seen as reflected in the increasing number of Confucian schools being established over the past few years. According to the Confucius Foundation of China reported by China Daily (2015), over 100 Confucius Schools have been opened, and their goal is to open 10,000 Confucius Schools nationwide to promote Confucius' teachings.

Interestingly, this revival of the Confucian tradition in China echoes the content of a book published in the West in the same year ‘Without Roots’ (2007), by the previous Pope Benedict XVI (Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) and Marcello Pera. They invited readers to imagine what the future of a civilization is that has abandoned its moral and cultural history. ‘Without Roots’ calls us to reconnect with humankind’s roots; it urges the West to embrace a spiritual, rather than political, renewal - and to accept the moral values that, it is argued, alone can help us to make sense of changes in technology, economics, and society. Indeed, the reappraisal of moral values
appears to be on the wider societal agenda not only for the West, but also for the East.

The moral resources from traditional Confucianism face contemporary moral and public policy challenges in China. I have been searching for a suitable term to describe this form of ‘reconstructed’ Confucianism, I encountered and adopted this term from ‘Reconstructionist Confucianism’ (Fan, 2010; Sim, 2007) and realized that it is the most suitable term to describe traditional Chinese cultural values in the contemporary setting. Reconstructionist Confucianism is able to comprehend ancient Confucian traditions, as well its development through history. It not only pays respect to Confucius, but also his disciples such as Mencius who further developed Confucian traditions. Reconstructionist Confucianism presents a comprehensive understanding of Confucian wisdom; it appreciates the Analects, as well as values other Confucian classics such as Great Learning, Doctrine of the Mean, Mencius and others Chinese classics. It carries traditional Chinese wisdom through generations and simultaneously passes it on. In this thesis, terms including Confucius, Confucian and Confucianism refer to this form of Confucianism - Reconstructionist Confucianism.

The additional benefit of applying this term is to distinguish it from other accounts of Confucian thought; for instance, Neo-Confucianism scholars have a tendency to recast the Confucian inheritance in the light of modern Western values. As an outcome, traditional Confucian heritage has been colonized by modern Western ideas such as justice, human rights and egalitarianism (Fan, 2010). This Neo-Confucianism approach applies traditional Confucian values, as well as borrowing Western moral thought, to deal with problems that face contemporary China. I agree with Fan (2010), that any Neo-Confucian account is untrue to the Confucian traditions and disables the capacities of Confucian wisdom to tackle the problems of our times.
2.6 A comparison of Reconstructionist Confucian and Western moral values

Confucian moral thought is embedded in a set of moral-epistemological, axiological, and metaphysical premises that are quite different from those of the dominant Western culture. It is worth investigating carefully and clarifying what is this Western dominant moral thought, as it provides the base for the comparison with a Confucian moral vision. This study pays close attention to Western moral thought derived from John Bordley Rawls (1921-2002), who was an American moral and political philosopher. Rawls’ work has had significant impact on the moral discourse of justice in the West, and has been applied as a standard to many moral and ethical issues.

Rawls’ magnum opus, A Theory of Justice (1971) was said at the time of its publication to be ‘the most important work in moral philosophy since the end of World War II’ (Gordon, 2008) and is now still regarded as one of the primary texts in political philosophy. The importance of his moral thought, dubbed as Rawlsianism (Kordana & Tabachnick, 2006), and the influences of its fundamental moral and political principles - ‘justice as fairness’ - cannot be over emphasized. The Western concept of ethical consumption is no exception; the principles of ethical consumerism are inclined to a deontological perspective; and are highly consistent with Rawls’ rights-based moral thought. This approach can also be reflected in the ethical concerns that emphasize the individual consumers’ role and rights, individual consumers’ responsibility for the environment, the passion for workers’ rights including child labour, the considerations for animal rights and so on. The concept of ethical consumption and ethical concerns reflective contemporary Western moral thought, which was in turn significantly influenced by John Rawls.

One of the key distinctions of Confucianism from Western moral thought is that Confucianism invites one to step out of individualistic moral discourses. When approaching moral challenges, the West emphasizes individual rights, equality, autonomy and social justice. Instead, Confucian thought provides a moral vision that gives accent to a life of virtue (de, 德), the autonomy of the
family (jia, 家), and the cardinal role of rituals (li, 礼) and humanity (ren, 仁). According to this line of thought, ren and li are complementary; the complete virtue ren cannot be achieved without the observance of rituals. Referring to human personhood, Confucianism sets out the exemplary figure of junzi (君子), a human person with good character and moral integrity. Confucius instructed that the route to becoming a junzi lies in the exercise of the virtue of righteousness (yi, 義).

The differences between Western and Confucian moral thought are of significance in this study. As discussed earlier, the Western concept of ethical consumption is heavily based on the principles laid down by consumer activists who are themselves influenced by the Western moral principles: fairness, social justice, equality, and protection of the individual. As can be observed, these fundamental principles rest upon the individualistic moral discourse, which is absent from a Confucian moral vision. Such differences provide different moral grounds for understanding the meaning of ethical consumption in the West and China. The observer will find that the ethical concerns facing the West will look quite different when approached from a Reconstructionist Confucian perspective.

2.6.1 A conversation between Confucian moral vision and Western moral principles

The principles of fairness, social justice, equality and protection of individuals, have provided the moral base for the Western concept of ethical consumerism, as well as ethical consumption. These principles are greatly influenced by modern Western individualists’ rights-based liberal theories. Consequently, a number of individual rights have been emphasized whenever people face social and/or ethical issues - for instance, workers’ rights, animal rights and children’s rights. Fan (2010) argues that such rights have simply been taken as a universal cure for solving any problem. Fan further points out that rights have been applied as the fundamental moral standards to assess all other moral conceptualizations. The declaration of human rights has produced a substantial literature (Fan, 2010) - any moral thought that fails to consider rights is viewed as inadequate and defective (Ip,
2003). This type of approach can be observed from the definitions of ethical consumption and its ethical concerns.

According to Ip, Confucian moral vision lacks a theory of individual rights, and it fails to consider individual rights and therefore is fundamentally defective (Ip, 2003). In response to Ip’s argument, Fan (2010, p.12) says: before one takes ‘rights’ as a standard to judge other moral notions, one needs to at least describe which rights one is speaking of and why they are qualified as criteria for accessing other things. Ip examined Confucian moral thought through the standards of a rights-based conception, without firstly asking why ‘a robust rights-based concept’ might be crucial to Asian moral thought. Following such a quest, it is also necessary to ask why the rights-based Western concept of ethical consumption is needed within an Asian context. The following section lays out the key difference between the Western rights-based moral principles and a Confucian virtue-based moral vision.

Family is at the heart of a Confucian moral vision (Fan, 2010). Firstly, Confucianism holds that virtue is learned first and foremost in the family, and within the bond of obligations that structure family relationships. As such, it is important to pay close attention to the central role of family - kinship love, the priority of family love over love for others outside the family, is the core of Confucian moral epistemology. Secondly, family relations, as a fabric of social relations, provide guidance and rules for action that gain their significance within society. Thirdly, Confucian moral vision, rather than being structured by rigid principles for ‘rights’ action, is indicated in the ways that one can achieve virtue. Fourthly, the flourishing of the family is considered more important than the flourishing of the individual, since the family as whole possesses a moral status and significance independent to that of individual family members. It is worth paying close attention to the significant role of the family, which sets the tone of Confucian moral thought.

2.6.1.1 Social justice

Western moral reflections on social justice represented by Rawlsian thought have a particular focus and character that is fundamentally in conflict with
Confucian moral reflections. This is because Rawlsianism and Confucianism have very different interests and positions. On the one hand, Rawlsian thought strives to explore what principles should be established to guide basic structures and improve social institutions. Subsequently, the pursuit of “the basic structure of society” becomes the “the primary subject of justice” (Rawls, 1971, p.7). On the other hand, Confucianism advocates the appropriate virtues of a just human and the central role of family, but such central concerns do not seem attractive to Rawlsian reflections on justice.

Rawls’ primary concern for justice is “the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation” (1971, p.7). As such, the theme of distributive justice alone comes to fore in the fundamental philosophical examination in a Rawlsian notion of social justice. Yet, it worth noting that the form of distributive justice highly regarded by Rawls can be traced back to Aristotelian interpretations of social justice that consists of general justice, rectificative justice and distributive justice (Aristotle, 1985). General justice is “complete virtue …in relation to another” or “the complete exercise of complete virtue … in relation to another, not only in what concerns himself” (1129 b). Rectificative justice is about “what is intermediate between loss and profit” (1132a). Distributive justice concerns “proportionate equality” in distributing honours or wealth (1131a).

However, Rawls only drew on one form social justice from Aristotle and essentially leaves the rest. Fundamentally, Rawls justification of social justice is not a complete notion of social justice and fails to comprehend the broader content. If we look closely, there are shared similarities between Aristotle’s social justice and Confucian virtue-orientated moral vision, as Aristotle’s general justice emphasizes virtue and the exercise of complete virtue in relation to others. Though Aristotle’s theory of how to exercise and achieve virtue is different from that of Confucius “following the rituals in order to achieve virtue”. Both acknowledge the importance of virtue and exercising virtue in a human’s life. Both Aristotle and Confucius address the issue of how one should live in terms of virtue, and relate virtue to the characteristic features of being human (Yu, 2007). Despite virtue being used as the basis
for general social justice by Aristotle, Rawls deliberately neglected it and
selected distributive justice as the foundation of his moral reflections.

Rawls’ primary concerns of social justice and principles have been
questioned; specifically, the issues centres on whether such a simplified view
of social justice is appropriate, or adequate, to account for the basic structure
of society. Nevertheless, the impact of Rawls’ principles on Western moral
thought cannot be overlooked and it has developed into a view that social
justice primarily concerns how society distributes primary social goods, such
as rights and liberties, power and opportunity, and income and wealth
(Rawls, 1971). As a result, some have radically challenged the fundamental
starting point of social justice, which has set the measurement of examining
social justice entirely on the issues of distribution. For example, fair trade as
part of ethical consumption, as the name suggests, pursues ‘fairness’ in
trading. Consumers in advanced countries are invited to pay more for a ‘fair
trade’ product, as a way of ensuring that the producers in the less-developed
country receive fair wages. The notion of fair trade not only echoes the sense
of distributive social justice, but also echoes ethical concerns for workers’
rights. Alongside fair trade, now many other ethical concerns and practices
are directed by the notion of rights-based social justice – it could be
suggested that it is the majority.

Confucian’ moral vision, however, does not have a single concept congruent
with the Western notion of justice in the sense of distributing it evenly and
seeking to give everyone ‘his due’ (Lau, 1983). Some might argue that
Confucianism’s yi (義), righteousness, is similar to the West notion of justice.
However, yi does not indicate distributive justice but “one’s sense of
appropriateness that enables one to act in a proper and fitting manner, given
the specific situation” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p.54). When mentioning yi
(righteousness), we must associate it with ren (humanity). As Confucius
instructs “all that matters is that there should be ren and yi’ (Mencius, 1a:1).
Both ren and yi are concerned with the intrinsic good of human beings, if the
intrinsic good is not established in the first place, the concerns for
instrumental good, such as money or profit, would not in actuality ‘be’ good.
Confucian social justice firstly promotes intrinsic good. As such it constitutes ‘the good human person’ in a fundamental sense. Confucius establishes the cardinal moral principles – the principles of ren to guide the individual in exercising and practicing virtue. Ren is regarded as a ‘complete’ virtue and a fundamental principle in directing people’s life and behaviours (Chan, 1955). “Ren is to love humans” (Analects, 7: 29). In the Aristotelian’s sense of general justice, Confucian ren can be viewed as a Confucian view on general justice, as it requires the complete exercise of complete virtue ‘ren’ in relation to others. To sum up, the ultimate concern of Confucian social justice is about loving humans by pursuing intrinsic good, rather than distributing instrumental benefits such as fairness or equality. Confucianism offers the moral vision that justice is to treat people ‘harmoniously’. Compared with Rawl’s ‘justice as fairness’; Confucianism’s social justice can be understood as ‘justice as harmony’.

2.6.1.2 Equality

The conception of humans as equals is reflected in the features of Rawls’ hypothetical original position, where he holds that such a position is a fair initial status quo for the elaborating of social justice, thus he gives his theory the title justice as fairness (Rawls, 1971). However, Confucianism cannot accept the Rawlsian conception of a human, or his idea of fairness – namely, treating people as equals. There is an aspect of equality in Confucianism ‘that is all humans deserve love’ that is morally important and should be retained. This can also be reflected in the Confucian principle of ren that is to love all humans – however, such love is not specified as treating all equally.

In contrast to Rawl’s hypothetical original position, Confucianism recognizes the “unequal aspects” among humans.

Firstly, each individual is different in the degree to which they possess and practice virtues; some make more effort and achieve more than others in such practices and learning. As such, Confucianism proposes that those who are more sincere, make greater effort and achieve more than others in practicing the virtues deserve more love and respect than the others. This “unequal respect” constitutes one of the important Confucian values: zun-
xian (尊贤), literally this means to respect the virtuous person. The importance of zun-xian is recorded in one of the Confucian Classics: Four Books - the Doctrine of the Mean: “By honouring men of virtue, one is preserved from errors of judgement” (20: 13-14).

Another ‘unequal’ aspect in Confucian moral thought can be reflected from his doctrine of ‘love with distinction’ and ‘care by gradation’. Affection towards a family relative: qin-qin (親親), constitutes another important Confucian value. When dealing with social relationships, Confucianism holds that it is not appropriate for one to give equal weight to concerns of one’s close family members as to those of strangers. It is appropriate to give more weight to the interests of one’s family members. In other words, it is important to prioritize family members’ interests compared with a stranger’s interests. Such moral reflections are based on a Confucian fundamental understanding of human being – the central role of family.

According to Confucius, humans are not atomistic, discrete, self-serving individuals gathering together to construct a society via contract. He holds that humans are first and foremost identified by the family roles that they take on: husband, wife, father, son, mother, daughter, brother, sister, and so on. The family roles of human existence are not chosen, but given. The parent-child relationship has not only become the most important human relation, but also demonstrates a noble aspect of human nature: sympathy and love (Fan, 2010). For Mencius, a parent cannot bear the suffering of their children; this natural sympathy constitutes the human deposition of love. Among all the Confucian virtues, it is parent-child love that provides the root of human virtue – ren (Analects 1:2).

Virtue – ren, as loving humans, is the fundamental human virtue, a profound and complete human virtue. However, “love needs an impetus (Fan, 2010 p. 16)”; another way to say this is that love needs a foundation to empower itself. The foundation of Confucian love is an idealized view of parent-child love, a blood-tie between parent and child. Such love engages a deep affection and selfless care, such love has nothing to do with romance, attraction or impulse, nor is it reciprocal. Parent-child love is not the
exchange of favours, nor the granting of privileges in the hope of similar privileges from the other side in the future. Parents love their children unconditionally without expecting rewards. Confucianism holds that only through first establishing, nursing and developing, parent-child love within the family then is it possible to extend such love to people outside the family, and thus to the wider context.

For Confucius, only through the extension of family love, can a good society then be possible. Evidently, the Confucian fundamental human virtue, ren, itself indicates an ‘unequal virtue’. In addition, Confucius points out three things that are in essence implicitly noble (zun, 尊) in relation to society – rank (爵), age (齡), and virtue (德). As he sees it, “at court, rank is supreme; in the village, age; but for assisting the world and ruling over the people, it is virtue” (Mencius, 2B2). Confucian moral reflection appreciates the unequal aspects in human life and therefore does not emphasize total equality in the sense of treating all equally; instead, Confucius embraces those ‘unequal’ aspects that teach humans how to behave appropriately and live a harmonious life.

2.6.1.3 Human rights vs. responsibilities of the family

In contrast to the Western pursuit of human rights, a Confucian approach suggests the over emphasis on individual rights could cause confrontation between agents; Confucians would prioritize harmony in any attempt to solve such problems. In the dilemma of child labour and the differences in approach between consequentialism and deontology discussed earlier, a third, Confucian, approach to values would draw on the significance of the ‘harmony’ of the existing situation, and ask what would be the implications of disturbing the existing ‘harmony’. In music, harmony refers to the combination of simultaneously sounded musical notes to produce a pleasing effect; more generally, it is the state of being in agreement or concord. In the context of Confucian moral reflection, it also describes a pleasing state - the state of peaceful agreement and cooperation, where all parts combine well together into a whole. In other words, harmony is a state of wellbeing without conflict.
In the case of the child labour dilemma, Confucius would not support the deontological approach that directly rejects purchasing products made by child labour; as such an approach would cause direct conflicts. The children may lose income and the family situation may deteriorate. With an outcome similar to a consequentialist approach, a Confucian approach may agree to continue with the purchase of the products to maintain harmony. Centrally however to this Confucian perspective the consideration of child labour needs to refer to the consideration of family. For example, if concerns for child labour conflict with family interest, the concern for family will be prioritized. Thus, virtue ethics (consequentialism) seems to have more in common with a Confucian approach, which gives individuals freedom and flexibility to make decisions in a specific context, being compassionate and generous, having regard to the other key Confucian elements – the family in this instance. A resolution of issues around child labour, based on a Confucian approach, would emphasize being compassionate and generous to one’s family and extending this to the wider context.

The primary ethical obligation for an individual is to fulfil his/her family role, to love and support their family members. In other words, Confucians hold that the welfare responsibilities reside first with the family. Confucius would not ask one to take responsibility for someone else’s children. As the basic Confucian moral orientation is “love with distinction” and “care by gradation” under the principle of ren, it requires one to start with loving one’s family and to give preferential treatment to one’s family members. The Western discourse on equality and fair opportunity does not pay close attention to the role of family, whereas Confucians hold the family as at the centre of virtue. This means that during the self-cultivation process, a person cannot set his/her family role aside. Since the development of virtue is always family-centred, Confucian virtue is neither egalitarian nor individualistic. Confucians would not encourage the liberal individualist conception of human rights.

The Western ethical concern for human rights has two distinct features; firstly, it is based on the notion of equal human rights; and secondly, in the context of ethical consumption, it requires consumers to consider the worker’s welfare, and most often those workers are not related to the consumers.
Both of these features run counter to Confucian moral values: those concerning ‘love with distinction’ and ‘care with gradation’; the pursuit of harmony over fairness, and the emphasis on achieving virtues other than equality. Confucian moral ideas cannot be viewed as isolated concepts, but require one to understand meaning within the overall moral system, under the instruction of the cosmic principles.

Take the example of fair trade, “the power is in your hand (or wallet)” - this is the message fair trade conveys to individual consumers. Fair trade organizations advocate: “with fair trade you have the power to change the world every day. With simple shopping choices you can get farmers a better deal. And that means they can make their own decisions, control their futures and lead the dignified life everyone deserves (Fairtrade Foundation, 2016)”. The word ‘power’ and the ability of power to achieve change has been presented. Evidently, and as the literature also described, what ethical consumption is about ‘empowerment’, to empower consumers to make change in the world through their consumption behaviour. The premise of the above message is that every individual consumer encompasses such power and they are encouraged to use their power – here to empower others.

The idea of power within a Confucian moral vision, though, is very different. Though Confucius did not deny individual power, such individual power is almost invisible in Confucian moral reflection, as individuals are pre-located in certain positions within society. Firstly, the individual role is demonstrated by their family role, and the family is the key unit of a society. The whole society is funded based on the key principles and orders (hierarchy). These concrete principles - known as the hierarchy in Chinese society - also defined as “five principal relationships” (Slote & De Vos, 1998, p.121), and they are: ruler and minister, father and son, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife, friend and friend. The emphasis on social hierarchy and the family unit dims the power of the individual.

These principal relationships allocate each individual’s key relationship within Chinese society. Accordingly, it would be wrong for the son to instruct his father, as it would be perceived that the son has exceeded his power over
his father, which is disrespectful. Similarly, if one individual starts to interfere in distant issues, such as fair trade in a distant country, without instructions from the governor or government, it will possibly be viewed as ‘an act in excess of authority’. Given the relationship to hierarchical power – when the individual assumes that ‘instruction’ from those above will be provided, they otherwise lack the appropriate frame needed for action. This need for explicit approval and the provision of frames focus more attention on the government’s role. The government (ruler and minister) conversely draws its authority from the embodiment of appropriate virtues in the individual.

In the *Book Rite - Great Learning*, this progression is clearly recorded, “‘their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated; their persons being cultivated, their family were regulated; their family being regulated, their States were rightly governed; their States being rightly regulated, the entire world was at peace.’” This teaching, demonstrates the importance of order that comes from self-cultivation, to family-regulation, to state-governance, and finally to world-peace. It seems less likely that Confucians would encourage the individual to use his/her individual power in consumption as the Western concept of fair trade does. Confucius would emphasize that self-cultivation is the root to achieve a better world; and everything must follow its order. From this Confucian view, if a society relies overly on the liberal principle of self-determination to maintain order, that society cannot be kept in good order for long-term in human flourishing. In the Confucian view ‘good order’ comes from the interrelationships between individuals and groups. It is not manifest in the exercise of individual choices. This is not to render the individual ‘powerless’ but rather to highlight that the exercise of power is construed in a different fashion.

### 2.6.2 A Confucian view on human and nature relationships

Within the Western ethical consumption literature, one of the major concerns points to the environment; consumers are encouraged to consider how their consumption impacts the environment. The word “environment”, has two meanings in the sixth edition of the Collins dictionary: 1) *The surroundings in which a person, animal, or plant lives*; 2) *the natural world of land, sea, air*
plants and animals. It is interesting to learn the meanings of environment contain ‘animals’, yet within the subject of ethical consumption, animal welfare or animal rights is distinguished as a separate and distinct concern. The environment and animal concerns are assigned to different ethical spheres within consumption practice, and each concern is individually developed as its own subject – though this is not to suggest the two are not related.

The Western ethical consumption discourse around environmental concerns is almost entirely centred on the physical environment. In contrast, Confucian moral reflections on the environment focus on the significance of cosmic principles and the interrelations of its components. Confucianism instructs humankind to engage in appropriate human and environment relationships by following these cosmic principles. In Confucian language, the term environment has a much broader meaning and it is embedded within Confucian metaphysical views. The principles of cosmos, in particular, are explained in the Classic of Changes also known as I Ching (Yijing, 易经). The primary postulate of the cosmic principles is that they structure and govern the cosmos, including the heavens, earth, men, animals and all myriad things (Fan, 2010). Confucianism establishes that humans and the environment are located and their relationships are properly determined (Cheng, 1998). In other words, both man and environment are articulated from the perspective of the cosmos itself and are all interrelated and parts of the cosmos.

In contrast, in the current Western ethical consumerist account, people inherit a rights-based moral foundation, and transfer this equal rights view to the environment - plants, soil, species, animals, as well as the whole ecological system; hence, components of the whole system are considered as separate entities having rights. The Confucian cosmic-principle-orientated account of human environment relationship stands in sharp contrast to these Western moral reflections. For Confucius, humans, animals, and the ecological system are not isolated entities, nor should be treated as separate entities with rights. From the Confucian perspective, the Western ethical
concerns are fragmented, incomplete, one-sided and lack an overall view of the environmental system.

Confucian views on the environment are heavily based on the cosmic principles and state that Heaven - a quasi-person God - in order to instruct human conduct, establishes moral principles. This has practical implication on how humans should use resources in nature to sustain their livelihood. Confucianism emphasizes ‘harmony’ between humans and nature, and views nature as a supply for human flourishing. An idea can be seen from Hexagram (離) - and extracted from Classic of Changes (I Ching) - ‘so as to knot cords and make nets for hunting and fishing.’ The Confucian view of animals, is in sharp contrast to some Western activists who propose animal rights to the extreme; from a Confucian perspective it is morally acceptable to use animals as food to support human life.

‘Animal rights’ can be observed as an example of the rights-based moral idea that has blossomed in the West. Compared with the well documented moral discourses around animal rights and animal welfare in the Western literature, there is not much written material about animal welfare in Chinese literature. Traditional Chinese cultural value materials do not offer much discussion of animal welfare. Wu (2013) asserts that there is a lack of direct and detailed discussion about animal welfare in terms of Chinese cultural values. Wu’s argument may not be the complete truth; but it is safe to say that Confucian moral philosophy is human centred in its teachings, and as such pays little attention to animal welfare.

When the stables were burnt down, on returning from court Confucius said, "Was anyone hurt?" He did not ask about the horses. The Analects X.11 (tr. Waley), 10–13 (tr. Legge), or X-17 (tr. Lau) [廄焚。子退朝，曰： "傷人乎？ " 不問馬。] (Groves, 2013, p. 5)

This Confucian teaching suggests that, by not asking about the horses, Confucius demonstrates that the sage values human beings over property or over animals – which in this context can be considered as property.
slightly different perspective on this Confucian teaching, Confucius suggests that animals’ lives are not as valuable as humans – and he sees animals as a possession – implying that the human is in the dominant or governing position. In addition, Confucianism also expresses that humans should not feel pity toward the sacrifice of animals in their performance of human rituals (The Analects, 3:17; 6:6). Thus, it can be observed, the human nature relationship is set within thick, cosmic constraints.

2.7 Confucian moral implications on consumption

Though Confucius did not directly offer particular moral principles to guide consumers’ consumption behaviour, we can nevertheless still infer some useful principles and virtues that are applicable in Chinese consumers’ contemporary consumption. The holistic approach of Confucianism suggests it is worth paying attention to those Confucian principles or virtues that are proposed for a person to live a good life as a whole, rather than designed exclusively to govern one aspect of life. More importantly, when we approach these virtues and principles, we should be aware that they are operating under the larger-scale cosmic principles.

The moral basis for the concept of ethical consumption is almost unsurprisingly entirely from a Western perspective in the Western literature. A few moral reflections on traditional Chinese moral thought and its implications for contemporary Chinese consumption can be found in Chinese literature. For example Xu (2011) attempts to reveal the ethics of consumers in China, Kong (2009) offers a discussion on Confucian consumption ethics, Yin (2004) discusses Mencius’ moral reflections for China’s consumption situation. However, most apply those moral reflections from a governmental perspective, or at a theoretical level, without extending those moral thoughts to consumers lived consumption experiences. There is thus a lack of discussion of traditional Chinese moral thought, in particular in relation to how Confucian moral vision influences Chinese consumers’ ordinary consumption, and how Confucian moral vision can be linked to the Chinese sense of ethical consumption in contemporary China.
2.7.1 Frugality

The virtue of ‘frugality’ is not exclusive to Confucian moral reflection; in the West, simplicity and frugality are also highlighted by scholars such as Singer (1997). The current Chinese government also advocates the importance of living a frugal life. However, quite often, the Chinese origins of frugality are forgotten. Just as discussed above, Confucian moral reflections are based on the key principles of ren and li. The virtue of being frugal originated from the context of the practice of rituals. Confucius gave an example to show how he would revise a rule of li: “a ceremonial cap of linen is what is prescribed by li. Today black silk is used instead. This is more frugal and I followed the majority” (The Analects, 9: 3). Frugality in ritual practice is also supported by another passage, where the sage argues that “with the rites, it is better to err on the side of frugality than on the side of extravagance” (The Analects, 3.4). Confucian rituals make a virtue of frugality and this can be borrowed in moral reflections on consumption (Kong, 2009; Yin, 2004).

Over-consumption stands in opposition to being frugal, however, it has been largely neglected in existing ethical consumption studies, where most of the interests in ethical consumption have explored the attitude-behaviour gap, or how to encourage more ethical purchasing. Beyond ethical consumption in the marketing literature, social researchers such as Guha and Advani (2006) have questioned how much a person should consume. This echoes Confucian moral reflections on being modest and thrifty, such values can be seen from another one of Confucius’ teachings:

The Master said, “What an extraordinary man was Hui! Living in a shabby neighbourhood on a bowlful of millet and a ladleful of water—most people could not have endured such misery, but Hui did not let it take anything away from his joy. What an extraordinary man was Hui.” (子曰: “一箪食, 一瓢饮, 居陋巷, 人不堪其忧, 回也不改其乐, 贤哉回也。”——《论语·雍也》) (extract Confucius, The Analects, translated by Chin, 2014, p.85)

From the master’s praise of Hui, it can be seen that Confucius encourages living thriftily and humbly. According to the Chinese Confucius researcher
Kong (2007), Confucius’ teaching has had an important impact on Chinese consumption values: living thriftily is considered as the prime virtue in consumption. According to the McKinsey Global Institute, although China is the world’s fifth largest consumer market (right behind the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Germany) with private consumption at $890 billion in 2007, China’s consumption-to-GDP ratios is constantly shrinking. Chinese consumption decreased from approximately 51 per cent of gross domestic product in 1985 to 43 per cent in 1995, 38 per cent in 2005, and down to 34 per cent in 2013 (Atsmon & Magni, 2012).

The above statistics show that Chinese consumers have extraordinary high ability to save, the average Chinese family saves 25 per cent of its discretionary income, about six times the savings rate for US households and three times the rate for Japan's. Indeed, China's savings rate is 15 percentage points above the GDP-weighted average for Asia as a region (Devan et. al, 2009). The above statistic reveals the frugal aspect of Chinese consumers, as it reflects a low consumption rate and extraordinary ability to save money are behavioural and structural elements in Chinese consumption (Devan et. al, 2009). The Confucian virtue of being frugal provides a fundamental basis for behavioural, as well structural, guidance to the Chinese consumers.

2.7.2 Cheng-xin

The principle of *cheng-xin* (誠信), meaning sincerity-fidelity, has become the most frequently used term in the recent years as many commentators point out that *cheng-xin* is absent in China, in particular in the market (Fan, 2010). Many Chinese scholars have claimed the importance of the Confucian virtue of *cheng-xin* in reshaping the ethical character of the Chinese market (Li, 2008; Liang et al., 2005; Yang & Wang, 2005; Xu & Chen, 2005; Chen & Lan, 2005). The principle of *cheng-xin* presents a truthful relationship that carries mutual respect and trust. Sadly, there is a lack of *cheng-xin* between consumers and traders, as well as within Chinese society as whole.

“Now, we have a serious problem with morality in Chinese society. The basic issues are that we lack basic trust and we also lack kindness”, said
Professor He Huaihong, the author of *Social Ethics in a Changing China: Moral Decay or Ethical Awakening?* (He, 2015). Professor He is an historian, ethicist, social critic, and unapologetic defender of Confucianism. In his book, he proposes an intellectual framework to guide Chinese people’s behaviour and restore social ethics in China. The lack of trust is reflected in current coverage presented by the Chinese mass-media, which is filled with negative news and reports pointing to the absence of *cheng-xin* in China.

In 2008, the infamous poisoned milk incident was indelibly written on the minds of Chinese consumers. Six babies were killed and about 300,000 were left sick after consuming infant-formula contaminated with the industrial chemical melamine (Foster, 2011). This melamine-contaminated infant-formula caused urinary tract stones in children (Chen, 2009). The producer of this poisoned milk was San-lu (三鹿), which was a well-respected company with over half-a-century’s history. It was founded in 1952, and through several generations of hard-work it was once ranked as one of the top 500 Chinese brands by World Brand Lab in 2005; one year after, it was evaluated as the number one Chinese dairy producer by Foster. The value of this brand was over 1,490,700,000,000 RMB. It was a company that consumers trusted and respected; suddenly it turned out to be a ‘silent killer’.

However, the milk incident did not mark an end to the trust crisis in China. Alongside this incident, there have been many more food problems and food safety issues. These are still being reported. Below is a list of Chinese food scandals gathered from news reports and journal articles via internet information, mostly in the form of news reports. The purpose of providing this table is to demonstrate the current situation Chinese consumers face and to evidence why there is an absence of trust in the Chinese market.
Table 2 Examples of food scandals in China.

Source: Edited by the author based on the news reports in the Chinese media and online news.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Food safety incidents in China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1.1 Poisonous Jinhua ham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2.1 Counterfeit baby formula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2 Adulterated pickled vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.3 Counterfeit alcoholic drinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.4 Soy sauce made from human hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>3.1 Sudan I Red Dye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>4.1 Counterfeit drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.2 School food poisoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.3 Contaminated turbot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.4 Pesticide residue on vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.5 Infected snail meat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.6 Poisonous mushrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>5.1 Counterfeit drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.2 Alleged carcinogen used in frying oil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3 Contaminated wheat gluten and rice protein used for export</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.4 Sewage used in tofu manufacturing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.5 Cardboard bun hoax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>6.1 Tainted Chinese dumplings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.2 Contaminated powdered ginger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.3 Contaminated baby formula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.4 Contaminated egg products</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Food safety incidents in China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Food safety incidents in China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>7.1 Plastic tapioca pearls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.2 Pesticide in mantou (Chinese steamed bun/bread)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.3 Goat urine duck meat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.4 Formaldehyde blood pudding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>8.1 Gutter oil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.2 Dyed green beans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>9.1 Tainted pork scandal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>10.1 Contaminated strawberries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>11.1 Pork scandal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.2 Lamb scandal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.3 Recycled out-of-date food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.4 Beef scandal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.5 Cat meat scandal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table lists some of the food safety issues over the ten years from 2003-2013. As can be seen, food safety problems were as various as consumption choices, with the products ranging from vegetables to meat, from baby food to alcoholic drinks, from everyday foods to drugs. From this table, it appears that the food safety problem shows no signs of decreasing, as by 2013 there were still five incidents reported.

The food safety issues not only caused direct life and economic losses, but also created distrust in the Chinese food system domestically, as well as internationally (Ortega et al., 2011). Many Chinese scholars have pointed out the significance of restoring Chinese consumers’ trust and many of them happen coincidentally to point to the ancient Confucian moral principle of *cheng-xin* and view it as an appropriate moral framework to tackle many problems facing China (He, 2015; Fan, 2010; Li, 2008; Liang et al., 2005; Yang & Wang, 2005). *Cheng-xin* frames expectations - consumer to merchant and vice versa, as well as between consumers to government and government to consumers.
2.7.3 Ren-yi

The principle of ren-yi is commonly regarded as the fundamental principle and virtue in Confucian moral vision, as it provides guidelines for people on how to live a virtuous life. Yet the importance of this principle in consumers’ consumption life has not often been recognized. In previous studies into consumers and their consumption behaviour, there was a tendency to narrowly focus on the consumption life without being able to comprehend consumption as a part of life overall. Indeed, consumption life is part of human life, the general principle for guiding a good life is also important and useful in providing guidelines for consumers’ consumption. Consumption, on the surface, may appear as simply being buying a few items; yet there are deeply embedded principles that can be found behind those simple purchasing acts; as Burke et al. (1993) suggest, all purchasing behaviour is to some degree ‘ethical’, as it involves moral judgements.

The role of family has been highlighted in the earlier discussion, which lays the foundation for the following argument. When the Western literature presents the concept of ethical consumption, it addresses the individual consumer as a unit; yet, such presentation may not work the same way in China, as family is the basic unit of the society rather than the individual person. As such, when Chinese consumers make consumption choices, their family role cannot be neglected. If each Western consumer can be perceived as being within an ‘individual bubble’ the Chinese consumer is within the ‘family bubble’. In other words, the Western concept of ethical consumption directly makes the assumption that ethical consumption is between the individual consumer and the consumption objects, whereas Chinese consumers need to negotiate within this ‘family bubble’ first when they make a consumption choice.

Within the Chinese family unit, blood ties bond love. Each family member fulfils multiple roles in the family. The virtue ren-yi can be presented as family love and the appropriateness of one’s family role within the unit of family. The sense of ren-yi can be found in any family relationship, in particular, the parent-child relationship. Confucius emphasised the virtue - xiao (filial piety,
This virtue implies that a filial child must take on the obligation towards his/her parents, such as taking the responsibility to take care of the parents physically, mentally, socially and spiritually. The complete view of filial piety is expressed in the Confucian Classics the *Analects* and the *Classic of Filial Piety* (xiaojing, 孝经) gives advice on filial piety; that is, how to behave towards a senior.

In the first place, Confucius holds that without practising the virtue of *xiao*, children cannot cultivate virtue for human lives, and neither can they extend virtue in their lives. To look after one’s parent is the fundamental virtue within the family. Within the consumption context, filial piety can also be found. For instance, when one purchases or consumes, he/she is not only considering for him/herself, but must consider the whole family’s welfare first. Such consideration for the family has been established in history and recorded in many Chinese classics. For instance, there is a story called “Kong Rong shares the pears” (孔融让梨) written in *San Tzu Ching* or *The Three Character Classic* (sanzijing, 三字经), which expresses the desired virtue in the family. The story is not just about consuming pears, rather it illustrates how an individual should place him/herself within the Chinese family.

**Kong Rong shares the pears**

In the Eastern Han Dynasty, there was a person called Kong Rong. He was very smart ever since he was a little boy. He had five older brothers and one younger brother.

One day his father bought some pears, picking one of the largest and giving it to Kong Rong deliberately. But Kong Rong shook his head and picked up the smallest one.

His dad was very curious, and asked: “Why?”

Kong Rong said: “I am younger, so I should eat the smaller pear, and (my older) brothers should eat the bigger ones.”

His dad was very glad after hearing his words, but asked further: “What about your younger brother who is younger than you are?”
Kong Rong said: “I am older than him, so I should leave the bigger one to my little brother.”

This story was my favourite from Chinese history; it not only tells of the virtue of xiao that Kong Rong prioritized his parents, but also demonstrates how he places himself within the whole family in relationships to his other brothers. Kong Rong not only demonstrated the virtue xiao but also the virtue of self-cultivation, being humble and modest. This selfless love is about being humble oneself and thinking about family members’ welfare before your own. Although this story is only about sharing pears, it actually sets the example for all actions and how one should locate oneself and relate to one’s family. The Chinese virtue of filial piety is the image that the son carries the father on his back (Fan, 2010).

Interestingly, there was a film lunched in 1998 in China, called Going to school with Dad on my back. This film was based on a true story and tells of a 16-year-old young boy who pursues his education and in the meantime takes on the responsibility of looking after his father. This film asserts the Chinese virtue ren and yi within a family story. It suggests that the norm is that in human nature that children love their parents; just as the parents love their children. This film was widely used as an educational film to all Chinese students at that time. The image of ‘the son carrying his father’ has stayed with me since then, as I was one of the students who watched this film at our local school.

Contrariwise to the virtue of xiao that emphasizes children’s responsibility to their parents, for Confucians, parents are also obliged to work hard to achieve the chance of a better life for their children (Fan, 2010). Accordingly, parents or the family can offer their children many advantages; for example, providing better education opportunities, perhaps by sending children to a private school or having private classes, or by offering a safe and secure family environment, by providing travel aboard opportunities, and by preparing the best available foods, clothes and tools. All of these might substantially enhance the children’s opportunities in gaining a ‘better’ position in society than their parents. As the autonomy of the family implies
that the development of the children should not subject to interference by the state or others, the responsibility of the development of children is located within the family – if the family cannot provide, it is not the role of others to step-in. This position may mean that Confucian principles make intervention to prevent child labour less likely in Chinese society.

The above discussion describes the family relationship between parent and children, which has important implications in understanding Chinese consumers’ consumption behaviour and their ethical considerations in consumption. It also worth noting that it is almost impossible to separate the individual Chinese consumer from his/her family role(s). In other words, Chinese consumers’ consumption stories are not just their stories, they are consumption stories in relation to their family relationships. Mencius says that Heaven has endowed the sprout of ren into each person’s heart; as he says: everyone has an innate affection-capacity to love others (Mencius 2A4:3; 2A4:5). Although Mencius saw the good nature of human beings, he also recognizes that people’s love is not equally presented for all: we naturally love our family members much more strongly than we do strangers.

2.8 Concluding remarks
The literature review demonstrates a journey that travels from 'the West to the East', from the contemporary ideas of John Rawls to the ancient philosophy of Confucius. On the one hand, this journey explores the Western perspectives of ethical consumption through the metaphor of a tree: its trunk – the concept of ethical consumption, its crown – the development and division of this concept, its root - the moral underpinning of the Western concept of ethical consumption. On the other hand, it investigates the Chinese moral vision from a Reconstructionist Confucian perspective. The literature review compares and contrasts the Western and Chinese moral perspectives, it implies that the Western concept of ethical consumption comes from a very different historical, cultural and moral background and that might not fit into Chinese society directly without modification or adjustment.
This literature review also reflects the meditation process of a “fusion of horizons” for the researcher. The “fusion of horizons”, according to Gadamer (2008) refers to the kind of connection between the unfamiliar (or alien or ancient) outlook from the text the reader encounters. This unfamiliar voice from the past horizon speaks to the reader in the present horizon. In particular, during the literature review on Confucius’ moral vision, which represents an ancient Chinese wisdom from thousands of years ago, I felt for the first time, that I had a proper encounter with Confucian moral thought.

For one, the cultural foundation, I am Chinese so I have inherited elements of Confucius' teachings without releasing it; and such a cultural bond provides a deep connection. Moreover, my doctoral studies in the UK context provide a different perspective from which to appreciate Confucianism, from a renewed perspective towards the Confucian moral vision after my encounters with the West. In addition, the common element is that we are all human, we move within a certain cultural–linguistic context, within a certain cultural tradition, that connects the past and present (Zimmermann, 2012).

The literature review process also taught me the significance of tradition; I almost forgot and neglected the importance of tradition in my research at the beginning of my studies. Tradition sometimes can be viewed as a hindrance to the understanding of new phenomenon, but on the contrary, it is the foundation that makes understanding possible (Gadamer, 2008). When I first encountered the Western concept of ethical consumption, I abandoned the Chinese traditions behind me, yet I was still puzzled; only after I reclaimed my Chinese tradition – Reconstructionist Confucianism, - did I gain insights into the Western concept of ethical consumption form an updated and a holistic view: I realised that the Western concept of ethical consumption is not a universal concept that fits all contexts, if ethical consumption could mean something different in a Chinese context, it could also mean something else in other different cultural contexts. This leads to a holistic view towards the understanding of the concept of ethical consumption. At last, I must thank the traditions from where I came from, which enable me to create the conversation between the Western concept of ethical consumption and the possible meanings of Chinese ethical consumption.
Chapter 3. A natural history of the study

3.1 Introduction

Compared with a traditional thesis, which often includes a methodology chapter, this natural history chapter has a similar essence. The reason for the use of ‘a natural history chapter’ instead of a traditional methodology chapter is to reveal an evolving journey. Alasuutari (1995) argues: “false leads and dead-ends are just as worthy reporting as the method eventually chosen” (cited in Silverman, 2013, p.355). As such, I have chosen to have a natural history chapter to reveal how the research methods developed through trials and errors, and the lessons I learned from this process. Unlike a traditional thesis which may present the research project in a neat, and smooth way, this thesis embraces the ‘messiness’ of the real research journey. This chapter tells the story of how this research evolved and how the fieldwork was conducted.

How to conduct research is largely based on a researcher’s philosophical stance that provides fundamental principles for each single decision to be made during the research process. Philosophical underpinnings offer a lens for researchers to see phenomena and get involved in analysis (Morse and Richards (2002); the research process and results are always shaped by these underpinning assumptions (Silverman, 2010). This means research methodology is grounded in the researcher’s ontological and epistemological position that incorporates “an implicit or explicit theoretical framework” (Barker, Pistrang & Elliott, 2002), and certain assumptions of what are social realities and how to understand them (Lapum, 2009).

3.2 Research philosophy progression

Before I know what my research philosophy is, I firstly knew what it was not - positivism. There are at least three key assumptions of positivism that do not match my imagination of research. Firstly, ‘independence’ - a researcher must be independent from what is being studied; secondly, ‘value-freedom’ – the choice of what to study and how to study it that can be determined by
objective criteria, rather than human beliefs and interests; thirdly, ‘operationalization’ – concepts need to be defined in ways that enables facts to be measured quantitatively (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p. 52). The following sections unpack my research philosophy – a philosophy other than positivism.

Among different philosophies, most of the central debates concern matters of ontology and epistemology. Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and existence; epistemology is about the theory of knowledge that helps researchers understand the best possible ways of enquiring into the nature of the world (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Reality (or realities) refers to “the state of things as they are or appear to be, rather than as one might wish them to be; something that is real; the state of being real; in reality in fact” (Collins English Dictionary, 2011). Yet, what is/are the definition/s of ‘real’?

Within social science, it is not unusual to notice a different formation of ‘reality’ – irrespective of it being pluralized or not. Reality, from that of everyday usage as exemplified in the definition from the Collins dictionary, is often viewed as realities by philosophers from social constructionism (e.g. Shotter, 1993; Watzlawick, 1984; Berger & Luckman, 1966) and postmodernism (e.g. Lyotard, 1984; Foucault, 1988b; Derrida, 1978), whereas it is interpreted as singular reality from a critical realism perspective (e.g. Bhaskar, 1978). The tricky thing about locating one’s philosophical position is that I often feel perhaps that the ideas of more than one philosophical position make sense to me. I had difficulties in making a decision; was I a critical realist, social constructionist, or postmodernist? The following paragraphs unfold the reasons for my difficulty.

Firstly, I thought that I might be a critical realist as the ‘structured ontology’ sounds profound and it built on three levels: real, actual and empirical domains (Bhaskar, 1978). The empirical domain compromises the perceptions and experience that people have; the actual domain consists of events and actions that take place, whether or not they are detected or observed; the real domain is made up of casual powers and mechanisms that cannot be detected directly, but that have real consequences for people
and society (Bhasker, 1978). Interestingly, though critical realists propose three levels of ontology, they see the nature of reality as singular. I am puzzled by such an idea, as I am not convinced how they determined that there is only one reality that consists of three levels, rather than the possibility of multiplies realities. In addition, I have difficulties actually to employ these three levels of reality in my own research conduct. I found it is extremely complicated to pin down each level of reality and found they provided little help in understanding meanings in consumers’ consumptions stories and experiences. I ended up overly focused on the theoretical three levels of reality and neglected the importance of every ordinary life event and its meanings.

Social constructionism views social realities as constructed by people rather than external factors or objects (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Social constructionism seems particularly attractive to me as it emphasizes that reality is constructed and given meaning by people in their daily interactions with others. Habermas (1970) referred to social constructionism as ‘interpretive methods’. Reading about social constructionism helped me confirm that I am certainly somewhere within the pantheon of ‘interpretive methods’. However, social constructionism does not pay attention to the external causes and fundamental laws in explaining people’s behaviour (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). At this point, I realised that I should look for something ‘interpretivist’ beyond social constructionism.

Finally, however, I cannot avoid mentioning postmodernism. For a relatively long period of time, I was convinced by its revolutionary ideas that I was a postmodernist. Many of the descriptions of the ‘postmodern condition’ (Harvey, 1993) excited me and resonated with me. To be specific, within the research context, postmodernism firstly is interpreted as “an incredulity towards metanarrative” (Lyotard, 1984), which shifted the ways of understanding knowledge. The metanarrative assumption is that knowledge is meant to be ‘true’ to all cultures, traces and languages (Webster & Mortova, 2007). Postmodern researchers doubt such an approach can fully explain the complexity of experiences and multiple perspectives involved that can access the issues. This, once again, confirmed my solid anti-positivist
philosophical position. In addition, postmodernists recognize the changes in
the structure of contemporary societies that have occurred, which also leads
to scepticism towards the legitimacy of metanarratives. Postmodernists
emphasize the plural nature of reality and the possibility of multiple views of
any facets of these realities. Furthermore, it appreciates the subjectivity,
multiple formality, multiple approaches to access and analyse any aspects of
these realities (Cheek, 2000).

Additionally, the sense of situational, temporal and contextual and fragmental
in postmodern research seems invaluable. The role of language has been
highlighted by postmodern researchers (Cheek, 2000). It all makes sense
and excites me as a researcher, as well as an individual. Yet there are also
some conflicts in my understandings of postmodernism that I failed to resolve.
For example, I can appreciate the multiple formalities of postmodernism and
also agree that knowledge does not necessarily have to be ‘true’ universally,
just as the Western concept of ethical consumption may not make sense to
customers in a very different context. However, I also suspect that there
is/are certain universal truth/s that exist, but that may be, or that may not be,
detected. Another issues with postmodernism was ‘decentring’. I am as yet
unable to get over ‘the self’. On the contrary, I actually realized the central
significance of self and understanding everything outside self through the self.
And this finally lead me to my current philosophy - phenomenal hermeneutics,
which is explored in the following section.

Looking through different phases of searching for my philosophy, I have
always remained on the interpretive side. I moved from one from another, I
guess the best way to tell the fitness of a philosophy is similar to trying out a
pair of new running shoes – put it on and go out for run.

3.3 Research Philosophy: hermeneutic phenomenology or
phenomenological hermeneutics

To start with, a hesitation was there. In the philosophical literature, a school
of hermeneutic phenomenology is found (Kafle, 2011); interestingly, there is
an alternative way to describe this school of thought – phenomenological
hermeneutics (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). Yet there is lack of a clarity around
the differences between these presentations. Clearly, they represent slightly different emphases as phenomenology and hermeneutics stand on different philosophical ground and each of them has established its own philosophy. As such, it is necessary to clarify what are they and how I come to my research philosophy.

3.3.1 A comparison of phenomenology and hermeneutics

“We know not through our intellect but through our experience.”

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception (1945)

Phenomenology is often viewed as an umbrella term encompassing both a philosophical movement and a range of research approaches and methods (Kafle, 2011). A member of writers (Kafle, 2011; Klein & Westcott, 1994; Osborne, 1994, Polkinghorne, 1983; Jones 1975) have acknowledged that this philosophical movement was initiated by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Phenomenology has been seen as applicable to research; Finlay (2009) suggests that phenomenology is the study of phenomena, their nature and meanings. Langdrige (2007) defines phenomenology as a discipline that “aims to focus on people’s perception of the world in which they live and what it means to them; a focus on people’s lived experience” (p.4).

Merleau-Ponty (1962) summarized the aim of phenomenology as being the description of phenomena. Van Manen (1997) pointed out the essence of phenomenology is the study of lived experience or the ‘life world’. The life world, according to Husserl (1970) is understood as what we experience pre-reflectively, without resorting to categorization or conceptualization, and often incorporates what is taken for granted or those things that are common sense or even seemingly trivial aspects in our lives. The study of these phenomena therefore, intends to return, re-examine and illuminate these ‘taken for granted’ experiences and perhaps uncover new and/or forgotten meanings (Laverty, 2003; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991).

‘In the social science, there is only interpretation. Nothing speaks for itself.’

The term ‘hermeneutics’ derived from the ancient Greek (hermeneuein: to utter, to explain, to translate). Thinkers who talked about how divine messages are expressed in human language initially used it. For example, the philosopher Plato (427-347 BCE) applied this word in dealing with poems as ‘hermeneutics of the divine’; and his student Aristotle (384-322BCE) noted down the first extant treatise on hermeneutics, in which he demonstrated how written and spoken words were expressions of inner thoughts. Hence, since its very first appearance, the term hermeneuein, along with its later Latin equivalent ‘interpretari’, has been associated with the mission of understanding some kind of written and spoken words (Zimmermann, 2012).

Hermeneutics, originally was the practice of exegesis, the determination of the divine meaning in scared texts through close reading (Arnold and Fischer, 1994). Consequently, hermeneutical methods were developed from the context of religious studies. For example, hermeneutics established a framework for the analysis of the Holy Bible (Bussiere, 2011). Bleicher (1980, p. 12) further explained that “… the interpreter is instructed to analyse a passages’ grammar and to consider the passage in the broader contexts of Christian life”. Hermeneutics was, in time, developed to a theory of text that is not restricted to religious scriptures. During the early twentieth century, hermeneutics was dominated by the idea that it was possible to maintain ‘objectivity’ if an interpreter followed the prescribed procedures strictly. This form of hermeneutics is often known as ‘hermeneutical theory’.

3.3.2 The overlap between phenomenology and hermeneutics

The philosophy of phenomenology presents more than a single approach idea. The tradition of phenomenology has been classified under three major headings. They are: transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology and existential phenomenology (Kafle, 2011). The conceptualization of phenomenology envisaged by Husserl was later termed ‘transcendental phenomenology’. The fundamental premise of this school of thought is that experience is to be transcended to discover reality. Husserl proposed the idea of reduction to refer to suspending personal prejudices or ‘bracketing’ particular beliefs about the phenomena in order to see it clearly (Laverty, 2003); because of this, the idea of reduction is often termed as
bracketing in phenomenology. Research based on this school of thought believes that it is possible to suspend personal opinion and to achieve a single, essential and descriptive presentation of a phenomenon (Kafle, 2011).

Hermeneutics is quite often understood as a basic human activity of interpretation, concerned with understanding the meaning of communications or life situations. However, the term hermeneutics has much broader meanings and indications. According to Arnold and Fischer (1994), under the umbrella of hermeneutics, are included four headings: hermeneutical theory, philosophical hermeneutics, critical hermeneutics and phenomenological hermeneutics. Each of these forms of hermeneutics has its own distinctiveness, yet shares the essence of hermeneutics - an interpretive approach. The difference is in how the interpretation is conducted and explored.

It can be observed that phenomenological hermeneutics (or hermeneutical phenomenology) has been individually categorized under the umbrellas (or overlap between) of both phenomenology and hermeneutics. This approach can be viewed as a sharp departure from Husserlian phenomenology. This school of thoughts comes from the ideas of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a disciple and successor of Husserl. Similar to Husserl’s phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology is also concerned with the life world and human experience as it is lived. The way this exploration of lived experience is conducted is where Heidegger disagreed with Husserl. Whereas Husserl emphasized the understanding of beings or phenomena; Heidegger focused on ‘Dasein’, which means ‘the mode of being human’ or ‘the situated meaning of a human being in the world’ (Laverty, 2003). The idea of ‘Dasein’, in the research context, can be understood as studying participants lived experiences to increase the depth of our understandings of being human and being-in-the-world.

Phenomenological hermeneutics is often viewed as the most recent version of hermeneutics (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). Its emergence was claimed to bridge hermeneutical theory, philosophical hermeneutics and critical hermeneutics. (Valdés & Valdés, 1987; Bleicher, 1980). Paul Ricœur (1913-
2005) is regarded as an important figure in modern phenomenological hermeneutics. This school of hermeneutics mediates between a recapture of an objective sense of interpreting text and an existential appropriation of its meaning into understanding. One of Ricœur’s major contributions to the development of hermeneutics was the entwining of hermeneutical processes with phenomenology. In this integration, Ricœur applies the hermeneutical task to more than just textual analysis, but also to how each self relates to anything that is outside of the self. A later section discusses this philosophy in more detail; for instance, its tenets, application in research and implication for the current study.

3.3.3 The realization of my research philosophy: phenomenological hermeneutics

"This is why philosophy remains a hermeneutics, that is, a reading of the hidden meaning inside the text of the apparent meaning. It is the task of this hermeneutics to show that existence arrives at expression, at meaning, and at reflection only through the continual exegesis of all the significations that come to light in the world of culture. Existence becomes a self – human and adult – only by appropriating this meaning, which first resides "outside," in works, institutions, and cultural movements in which the life of the spirit is justified."

-Paul Ricoeur, Charles E. Reagan, and David Stewart; “Existence and Hermeneutics, p 21.”

The quotation above is helpful to me in justifying why my philosophical position is what it is – phenomenological hermeneutics, and not vice versa. In essence, phenomenology is the study of essential meanings of phenomena (Merleau-Ponty, 1962); whilst hermeneutics seeks the hidden meanings inside text (Ricoeur, 1978). As Robinson and Hawpe (1986) demonstrated in the process of hermeneutics, experience does not automatically assume a narrative form. Rather, it is in reflecting on experience that we construct stories. The stories we make are accounts, attempts to explain and understand experience. However, this by no means suggests that phenomenological hermeneutics and hermeneutic
phenomenology are miles apart; on the contrary, they share considerate similarity in the way both has been written about in the philosophy literature. The following section focuses on discussing phenomenological hermeneutics and its implication for the study.

A discussion of a philosophy quite often starts from its ontology and epistemology. In phenomenological hermeneutics, the ontological idea moved away from Husserl’s epistemological question of the relationship between the knower and the object of study, to recognition of the ontological structure of being-in-the-world proposed by Heidegger (Zimmermann, 2012; Laverty, 2003). In agreeing with Heidegger’s opinion that language and understanding are inseparable structural aspects of human ‘being-in-the-world’, Gadamer said that “language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting” (1960-1998, p.389). Besides ontology and epistemology, axiology is also a concern of phenomenological hermeneutics. It is about values and ethics (Mingers, 2003). Axiology derived from Greek (ἀξία, axiā: "value, worth"; and -λόγος: -logos), is the philosophical study of value, also called value theory, which includes the disciplines of ethics, pragmatics and aesthetics (Kafel, 2011). In relation to ontological and epistemological positions, axiological considerations focus on the values that provide the standard for evaluation of ontological and epistemological claims.

In the philosophy literature, axiology also refers to the involvement of the researcher’s values and opinions in the process of research. As my introduction of research philosophy expressed, I know that a detached, uninvolved role of the researcher seen in a positivistic stance does not appeal to me. Phenomenological hermeneutics, on the other hand, cherishes the involvement of the researcher in the world of the research participants and their stories (van Manen, 1997). It aligns with the idea that gaining knowledge goes beyond the enumeration of mathematical properties (Kafel, 2011). As a hermeneutical thinker, Heidegger further removed the distinction between the individual and experience, viewed them as co-constructing each other and replying on each other. In other words, he
viewed bracketing as impossible, as one cannot stand outside the *pre-understanding* and historicality of one’s experience (Heidegger, 1927).

With such openness to pre-understanding, the major question about the utility of hermeneutics is seeing how we can distinguish between valid and invalid interpretations. Is there only one ‘correct’ interpretation? If not, how do we make a judgement on conflicting interpretations? The resolutions provided by hermeneutic thinking can be summarized in two ways. Hirsch (1928), first brought up the idea of ‘intended meaning’. He argued that the intended meaning of the *original* author determined the ‘correct’ interpretation of the texts. And he viewed such meaning as ‘universally valid’ meaning, as reader, what we do is merely apply it to our own context – to ‘constitute’ the work’s significance, which differs from reader to reader (Zimmermann, 2012). Yet, Hirsch was conscious that no interpretation would likely ever reach the one and only ‘intended meaning’ of the original author.

Ricœur who further developed hermeneutics from Gadamer introduced the second resolution. He pointed out that Hirsch’s responses were made out of the fear of relativism: how can we avoid our subjective interpretations that develop the text into a mirror of our own views (Zimmermann, 2012)? Ricœur sympathized with Hirsch’s desire to secure interpretation’s objective meaning, but he rejected Hirsch’s division between original authors’ ‘intended meaning’ and readers’ subsequent understanding of its significance. He argued that Hirsch’s account failed to acknowledge the inexhaustible worlds of human experience; the text presents us not just a straightforward situation, but something larger and richer, as we see in texts in literature, theology, history and philosophy (Zimmermann, 2012).

Ricœur introduces the idea of ‘reconstructing’. It references the idea that to interpret the text requires the ‘artful’ integration of the details into a coherent whole through an act of the imagination, based on individual experience (Zimmermann, 2012). In other words, Ricœur views reconstruction already as a work of interpretation that closely links to individual choices of aims, values and norms that determine the meaning of the texts. The essential point Ricœur is making is that to understand is to interpret; interpretation
requires a reader’s personal act of *integrating* textual details into a meaningful whole. This presentation is also a rejection of Hirsch’s distinction between description and evaluation as a means of securing so called ‘objective meaning’.

Ricœur proposes that objectivity can go beyond Hirsch’s narrow choices between objectivism and relativism. This can be traced back to hermeneutics’ rejection of the simple opposition of objective truth on the one hand, and subjective opinion on the other. For a long time, scientific discoveries rested on that golden standard of ‘objectivity’ that is strictly governed by rules. Today, however, increasing numbers of academics and scientists have come to the realization that this golden standard could be a golden calf, the false idol of ‘scientific objectivism’. While scientific methods remain as an important tool, scientists also realized that the process of discovering is much more intuitive and uncontrolled than formerly assumed. Now, objectivism and relativism appear as two sides of the same coin, both of them rest upon the same faulty conception of objectivity. In response to the toppling of the simple opposition of objectivism and relativism, a position beyond both becomes possible.

So what is this new possible position? At least, among many scholars, there is an emerging acceptable resolution regarding the achievement of the goal of ‘objective truth’. What has been proposed is that the attainment of objective truth is less like watching a spectator sport but more like playing a game. The idea of playing a game has its significance; for example, a tennis player needs to follow the rules when playing a tennis match, but each of the player’s moves are unique and require the player’s passionate *involvement*. It is only through such deep involvement that any understanding of the ‘play’ takes place. Such interpretation illustrates the thinking of hermeneutics, which asserts that that is how all knowledge works.

That is why it is significant to me to turn to a research philosophy such as phenomenological hermeneutics, which is where this deep involvement matters. A hermeneutic approach requires the researcher to engage in a process of self-reflection to quite a different end than that of phenomenology
Frankly, the bias and assumptions of the research are not suspended or bracketed, rather they are embedded and essential to the interpretative process. As a researcher, a detached spectator position is not helpful in searching for the meaning of ethical consumption, a concept that grows and matures with the researcher. Instead of forcing myself to seek the achievement of a somewhat ‘objective truth’, it is more natural to embrace the passionate engagement with research. Thus, there is a need for ‘critical reflections’ (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004) because of the deep involvement of the researcher; such critical reflection also associates with the ‘rigour criteria’ (van Manen, 1997) for this type research. A later section (3.8) is used to disclose further details on issues around my research criteria.

3.4 Phenomenological hermeneutics: implications for research

Polkinghorne (1983) suggests using the term methodology instead of method to describe the tradition of phenomenology and phenomenological hermeneutics. Phenomenological hermeneutics does not associate with one particular method (Kafle, 2011, Arnold & Fischer, 1994; van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutics avoids method for methods sake, and does not have a step-by-step method (Kafle, 2011). As such, phenomenological hermeneutics encourages a creative approach to understanding, and the use of whatever approaches are responsive to particular questions and subject matter (Laverty, 2003). The focus of phenomenological hermeneutics is well summarized by Wilson and Hutchinson (1991), as being toward illuminating details and trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives, with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is attentive to the philosophies underpinning both phenomenology and hermeneutics (van Manen, 1990). As Smith (1997) suggests, hermeneutic phenomenology methodology aims to produce rich textual descriptions of the experience of selected phenomena in the life world of individuals that are able to connect collectively with the experience of all of us. He points out the close relationship between the identification of the experience and a deep understanding of the meaning of that experience; he further highlights the role of ‘descriptive language’, that understating which
occurs through increasingly deeper and layered reflection by the use of descriptive language. In other words, our experience can be best understood through the stories we tell of that experience (Langdridge, 2007).

Though there is no prescription about methodological ‘sets of doing’ in phenomenological hermeneutics research, in the light of previous researchers such as van Manen (1997, 1990), who conducted research by applying this approach, a few guidelines have been suggested. For instance, Merriam (1998) suggests that the researchers select the sample with purpose and look for information rich cases. In terms of data generation, multiple tools can be utilized such as interview, observation and protocols (Kafle, 2011). In other words, as long as the research method is appropriate and serves the purpose to generate life world stories from the participants, which contribute to create a ‘text’, its application should be encouraged. It is impossible to follow strict methodological rules in phenomenological hermeneutics research; imagination is invaluable (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). In my literature review, I used the word ‘imagination; and it seems an important element in my research; as the thesis goes, data chapters may require more imagination. In the final reflection section, I would have a small paragraph reflecting on my research imagination. As it is with this that the creation of meaning rich text can be encouraged.

Pre-understanding is considered as an important concept in phenomenological hermeneutics research; it is also sometimes described as prejudice (Gadamer, 1989), pre-judgement (Arnold & Fischer, 1994), preconceptions or presuppositions (Zimmermann, 2012). Pre-understanding follows the recognition that, in advance of any interpretation, our interpretation of what we are about to interpret exists. Prior to any reflection, we already belong to a cultural world - Heidegger (1949) designated this relationship as ‘being-in-the-world’ (Bleicher, 1980). Ricouer (1984) highlights that we have a pre-understanding of life that searches for expression in the shape of stories. Pre-understandings are deemed an essential and intrinsic part of interpretation in phenomenological hermeneutics. The ideas of reading without prejudice suggested by thinkers such as Descartes, Kant, are not just undesirable simply but impossible,
since access to whatever we desire to interpret is only granted though our presuppositions (Zimmermann, 2012).

The implication of pre-understanding in research is that the interpreter and what is interpreted are connected by a context of tradition such as the accumulation of the beliefs, theories, codes, metaphors, myths, events, practices, institutions and ideologies that precede the interpretation (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). Even what inducted from our childhood provides pre-understanding of the things we interpret (Zimmermann, 2012). Within consumer research, the pre-understanding is found in two interrelated traditions: experience as consumer and researcher. For instance, without our shopping experiences as a customer in everyday shopping activities, we would not begin to makes sense of many phenomena we study; and as researcher we accumulate theories concerning consumer behaviour and these theories provides additional basis for making sense of consumer experiences. Phenomenological hermeneutics counsels us to take advantage of our pre-understanding to construct a coherent account rather than trying to put it aside when we take up our research. As such my pre-understanding plays a significant role in this research, and in my reaching interpretations.

The hermeneutic circle is regarded as a central concept in hermeneutics (Thompson et al., 1994; Hekman, 1986) and as Lindseth & Norberg (2004, p.149) state: “interpreting a text means entering the hermeneutic circle”. Consumer researchers have most frequently applied the hermeneutic circle as a methodological process for interpreting text (Hirschaman 1990, Thompson et al., 1990, 1989). According to Ricouer’s phenomenological hermeneutical interpreting theory, this hermeneutic circle constitutes three methodological steps: naïve reading, structural analysis and comprehensive understanding (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). These three steps of the interpretive process have been applied by researchers such as Lindseth and Norberg (2004). In various studies over 10 years in their empirical practice, they identified the advantage of this method of working in that there is a dialectic movement between understanding and explanation.
Lindseth and Norberg (2004), firstly, say that naïve reading refers to obtaining a naïve understanding of the text from initial readings - for instance, to read the text a couple of times to grasp its meaning as a whole. Secondly, structural analysis is the methodological instance of interpretation and its purpose is to formulate themes. During the structural analysis, text is divided into meaningful units. A meaningful unit can be word, phrase, part of the sentence, a few sentences or paragraph; it could be a piece of any length that conveys just one meaning. Units are condensed and abstracted to formulate sub-themes, themes and sometimes even main themes. Thus, structural analysis can also be described as thematic analysis (Kafle, 2011; van Manen, 1997) as a way to identify and form themes. The themes, rather than presented as abstract concepts, are rather given as condensed descriptions in order to disclose meanings. These themes, in turn, are compared with the initial naïve understanding for validation. It is not unusual to find that the themes formed from the structural analysis may, or may not be, consistent with the initial naïve understanding. In the case that the themes invalidate naïve understandings, this requires the researcher to re-read the text, therefore a new naive understanding is formulated and this understanding will be checked by a new structural analysis. Finally, the researcher comes to a comprehensive understanding; themes are formulated from the structural analysis and are reflected upon in relation to the research questions and the context of the study. The text is again read as a whole, the naive understanding and the validated themes are reflected on in respect of the relevant literature, and thus a comprehensive understanding is formulated.

The hermeneutic circle describes the back and forth, specific – general – specific circular movement of interpretation. It presents the idea that the meaning of a whole text is determined by its meaningful units (part) of a text. Meanwhile, those units are understood by referring to the whole of which they are a part (Bernstein, 1983). This interpretation process is described as an 'interactive process' (Thompson et al., 1994). It shows an evolving interpretation and reinterpretation process between the 'part' and the sense of the 'whole'. The hermeneutic circle implies that a holistic understanding of
the text must be developed over time; and initial understandings of the text often need to be modified with the developing understanding of the text as a whole (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). However, the dialectical tackling of the hermeneutic circle does not necessarily have to be shown in the written interpretation (Arnold & Fischer, 1994).

Last but not the least, phenomenological hermeneutics research pays attention to ‘rhetoric’ (Kafle, 2011). Rhetoric is the art of writing and speaking efficiently (Firestone, 1987). It is generally concerned with how language is employed. In relation to phenomenological hermeneutics research, it refers to the writing style of the research work. In order to explicate the essence of lived experiences by the participants and convey the meanings from their experiences, a language with an informal tone and with idiographic expressions is considered suitable for writing in this type of research (Kafle, 2011). Everyday language is encouraged in presenting the results in phenomenological hermeneutics, as this kind of language is closer to the lived experience (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Firestone, 1987). In addition, poetic expressions are also valued, as poetic expression makes the words mean as much as they can and creates mood, which reveals possible ways of being-in-the-world and ‘shows a deeper mode of belonging to reality’ (van den Hengel, 1982).

3.5 Research approach: phenomenological hermeneutical approach
As was said in the introduction, the subject of ‘ethical consumption’ has two ‘faces’ in this study; one face is the Western sense of ethical consumption and the other face the Chinese sense of ethical consumption. This study is interested not only in exploring the meanings of ethical consumption to the Chinese consumers – the Chinese sense of ethical consumption, but also interested in the conversations between the Chinese consumers and the Western concept of ethical consumption. In this way, the aim is to create a coherent and holistic account of the meanings of ethical consumption among Chinese consumers. The literature review laid out the Western concept of ethical consumption from its moral underpinnings to its division into separate concerns in marketing practice. Yet what Chinese consumers say about this Western concept, and the meanings of ethical consumption (in the Chinese
context) are to the Chinese consumers, remain mysteries. The research approach is to employ suitable methods to help resolve these mysteries.

This study follows a phenomenological hermeneutics approach, that is, to understand the essence of the phenomena of ethical consumption in China, through the interpretation of “text”: the Chinese consumers' opinions, experiences and stories. Thus, to obtain a rich text is vital in order to gain a deep understanding of the meanings of ethical consumption through the Chinese consumers described lived experience. The understanding of the meanings of ethical consumption is closely related to the identification of the Chinese consumers lived consumption experiences. As Smith (1997) suggests, deep understanding occurs through increasingly deeper layers of reflection of descriptive language, that is, the Chinese consumers experience can be best understood through the consumption stories that they tell of their experience. Stories are one of the most vital and natural aspects of communication that allow us to explore people’s lived experience.

The Western concept of ethical consumption, as the literature review discussed, is a concept driven by individualistic rights and individual power; whilst Chinese traditional values, rooted as they are in family – means Confucian moral vision invites one to step out of solely individualistic moral discourses. As such, this study pays attention to individual consumer’s stories, as well consumption experiences shared by the group of consumers. This study has two stages of fieldwork: the first stage was four focus groups concerned with listening to the experiences and stories shared by group participants; and a second stage where 14 face to face interviews were conducted to invite stories from individual participants. Although the two stages of data generation apply different methods and are conducted in different a period of time, they both contribute to research purpose and match a phenomenological hermeneutics approach. They offer a degree of triangulation (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). That is, by creating two information rich ‘texts’ as the driving force of the data generation, then naturally the data analysis can be seen as the process of interpreting the generated ‘texts’, with the benefit of being able to move between them. The following sections provide detailed descriptions of what was done.
3.5.1 Focus groups: to hear the Chinese consumers’ voices

During the first phase of data generation, I used focus groups to obtain the ‘text’. One way to describe a focus group is as ‘a group of individuals selected and assembled by the researcher to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research’ (Powell et al., 1996: 499). As Gibbs (1997) suggests, there are different ways to define focus groups found in the research methods literature, but the main features, such as organized discussion (Kitzinger, 1994), collective activity (Powell et al. 1996), social events (Goss & Leinbach, 1996) and interaction (Kitzinger 1995), identify the contribution that focus groups make to social research.

Quite often, group interviews may be used as an alternative name for focus groups; however, there are some key differences and it is important to distinguish the two (Gibbs, 1997). Group interviewing involves interviewing a number of people at the same time, the emphasis being on questions and responses between the researcher and individual participants in the group. Focus groups, however, rely on interaction ‘within’ the group based on topics that are supplied by the researcher (Morgan 1997: 12). Reflecting upon such a difference, there were prepared topics and questions during the conduct of group discussions, and the topics and questions were initially generated from the literature review and my understanding of the subject. Thus, ‘focus groups’ are a more suitable term to describe the approach taken in the first phase of this study.

Focus groups enabled me to hear the Chinese consumers’ opinions on the Western concept of ethical consumption. The literature review reveals that the Western and Chinese consumers have different moral resources. This difference raised the question as to whether the Western concept of ethical consumption will resonate with the Chinese consumers. However, there was a lack of detailed account of how the different moral resources impact on different understandings of the meanings of the concept of ethical consumption. The focus groups conducted, therefore, provide the opportunity to clarify such questions and, furthermore, offer detailed descriptions of potential answers.
As the chapter title suggests, this chapter is a natural history chapter; it aims to demonstrate the experimental, evolving research process, and in addition to offer maximum transparency on the research conducted. I hope to do this by openly sharing the messiness, trials and errors that occurred during the research journey. The conduct of the focus groups is one of those ‘errors’ that helped me to understand the study subject from a new perspective. The outcomes of the focus group stage fit the current research purpose and addressed the first research question well. However, this was somewhat ‘accidental’ and that is where the ‘messiness’ is hidden and the ‘errors occur’. There is an English idiom that says ‘kill two birds with one stone’ meaning to solve two problems at one time with a single action. The focus groups can be seen as this ‘lucky’ stone.

As for the two birds: the first bird is straightforward, it symbolizes the focus group outcome that serves the current research aim and addresses research objective one – to reveal what the Chinese consumers say about the Western concept of ethical consumption; the second bird requires a bit more explanation. Now, I need to make a confession that the second bird was originally the key purpose of the study, and the first bird was a surprising bonus obtained during the pursuit of the initial key purpose. That is, when I entered the field, the focus groups were to be conducted on the premise that the Western concept of ethical consumption was a concept understood by Chinese consumers. As the literature review suggests, Deng (2014) reported an attitude-behaviour gap among Chinese consumers that is highly consistent to the gap highlighted in the Western literature. From Deng’s study results, Chinese consumers did not seem have an issue in understanding the Western concept of ethical consumption; nor have others researchers reported such an issue. Thus, in the early stage of my research, I went to in the field to conduct the focus groups under the misapprehension that my participants had no problem in understanding the discussion topics.

It might also be worth mentioning that when I conducted the first focus group, I was following a slightly different research purpose, where the major interests were to identify the barriers to Chinese consumers’ ethical consumption behaviour. Of course, the concept of ethical consumption at
that point was considered to be the same concept to the Chinese consumer as that in the Western literature. The outcome from the focus groups I first referred to as a ‘tragedy’, as it demonstrated that my original research purpose and objectives were faulty. The lesson learned from this ‘tragedy’ was that we cannot make the assumption that the Western concept of ethical consumption resonates with the Chinese consumers before we hear their opinions; it is irresponsible to directly transplant from the West to a Chinese context without firstly asking the Chinese consumers; and there is a need to step back consider more deeply what does ethical consumption mean to those Chinese consumers.

In the end, the ‘tragedy’ turned out to be a precious lesson that helped redirect and refine the research. Such a feeling echoes a Chinese poem from the Southern Song Dynasty that reads: “After endless mountains and rivers that leave doubt whether there is a path out, suddenly one encounters the shade of a willow, bright flowers and a lovely village” (Lu You). [Or “Where hills bend, streams wind and the pathway seems to end, past dark willows and flowers in bloom lies another village.”] The first stage of fieldwork – the focus groups, laid the foundation for the current study; since the Western concept of ethical consumption was a ‘stranger’ to the participants, the focus groups discussion around the concept and its ethical concerns offered opportunities to hear the participants’ voices and opinions toward this Western concept. And such mood can be reflected from another Chinese poem from Qing Dynasty “in the garden grows more than the gardener sows” (Zhou xitao).

3.5.2 Narrative inquiry: to invite stories
Consumption is an everyday practice that continuously creates experiences and stories. Thus, following the phenomenological hermeneutics approach in this study, the text obtaining process can be described as “collecting stories”. As the earlier section discussed, phenomenological hermeneutics does not have a fixed routine of conducting research. Hence, the fieldwork can be viewed as a process of trying out what works the best and how to gain information rich ‘text’. We come across stories all the time in our lives; they shape and characterise how we interact with others (Webster & Mertova,
Stories allow us to construct who we are with regards to the shared common sense within the culture we inhabit (Gudmundsdottir, 1991). Stories are also seen as part of one’s self-identity and reflect the culture one comes from (Lazar, 2013). Collecting the Chinese consumers’ stories, therefore, offers the opportunity to listen to their voices towards the Western concept of ethical consumption, as well as to explore their understanding towards the meanings of ethical consumption in a Chinese context. The focus groups had assisted in some aspects – that they had not provided enough of a basis for the creation of meaning in terms of a Chinese narrative and story of ethical consumption.

‘Story’ and ‘narrative’ are often used interchangeably (Foster et al., 2006); a narrative is the ‘performative process of telling a story’, which we quite often associate with structure, knowledge and skills when we are creating a story (Denzin, 1997). Narrative provides the path to comprehend the structure and information that stories may contain. A narrative inquiry, as a research method, is used to understood and inquire into experience via “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). That means narrative inquiry invites participants to tell their own stories, enabling them to share their experiences and the meaning they have gained from these experiences (Foster et al., 2006). From a researcher’s perspective, listening to a good story can be a unique experience and by listening to the ‘text’ told by the ‘storyteller’, the ‘listener’ takes in this ‘text’, to comprehend the structure and interpret the meaning of it. Furthermore, in their own mind the ‘listener’ can co-construct this story with the ‘storyteller’. To create such text that was a need to undertake a second stage of data generation. This process was done through interviews with Chinese consumers to invite their stories – the consumer as ‘storyteller’ and me as ‘listener’.

The same story can be interpreted in different ways through a different listener’s ‘mental filters’, and such filters have been recognized by phenomenological hermeneutics research approach as “preunderstanding”. As such, each story provides a unique experience and as a researcher my
role (and experience) was to access these stories. My interpretation of these stories and the choices and process associated with the analysis of these stories reflect my preunderstanding of the subject. In other words, participants' stories enable the researcher to see what effect their experience has on those who are living that experience (Webster & Mertova, 2007). This is not to suggest that stories told by the participants are necessarily what ‘really’ happened, but they represent participants’ perceptions and interpretations of what happened in the past – in essence their reality (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Similarly, when these stories were received by me as the researcher in this study, I interpreted them based on my life experience and preunderstandings. In a similar fashion, when a reader reads these stories, they will make sense of the stories according to their particular reality. This process is like seeing reflected in one what is seen in another mirror; stories are told and retold, interpreted and reinterpreted. During these processes, the connections that are made and the ‘reality’ that can be represented in different ways are also central themes (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). This is also reflected in my phenomenological hermeneutics stance, rather than seek one objective universal truth, I focus on exploring consumers’ experiences inside the culture and social context of that specific situation (Kirkman, 2002; Webster & Mertova, 2007). The ideal that several voices should be heard is a cherished one (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p.152).

Initially, I described the face-to-face interviews phase as semi-structured interviews as it is considered as a suitable instrument for inviting individual consumer’s stories. According to Minichiello et al. (1990, p.19), semi-structured interviews are “repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding the informants’ perspectives on their lives, experiences or situations as expressed in their own words.” I chose to use this method as it involves a certain degree of structure, but also allows room to pursue topics of particular interest to the participants (Leidner, 1993). The main goal of the interviews was to investigate meanings of the participants’ experiences and their understandings of ethical consumption in their everyday consumption
activities. Therefore, to listen to the participants’ stories through their own voices played an important role in terms of generating a rich ‘text’.

However, after conducting few interviews, I realised that the term ‘semi-structured interviews’ was not the ‘perfect’ match. Though, there was a certain level of structure involved in the interviews, it was *not* ‘repeated face-to-face encounters’, as each interview is unique, the questions I prepared in my mind often come out in different a order when facing different participants; and the structure had to be forgotten during interviews in order to encourage participant to go further with their experiences and stories. Thus, I argued that structured, including semi-structured interviews are not flexible enough for obtaining rich stories during interaction with participants. There is a need for more freedom, space and spontaneity during the interviews. As such, I realised face-to-face interviews with guided questions are more suitable to describe the kind of interviews I did.

### 3.5.3 The involvement of the researcher

One of the main characters of phenomenological hermeneutics is the recognition of the researcher’s engagement and involvement in the process of obtaining knowledge. Similarly, in the data generation process, the preunderstandings of the researcher are also present. As explained in the above section, the data generation methods are focus groups and face to face interviews, both of the two phases require the researcher’s deep involvement. For instance, where to start a story? How to direct stories’ directions? And, how to co-construct the stories with the participants.

Reflecting on the engagement of the researcher, there are more issues beyond the above discussions. As the researcher’s eyes can see and the ears can hear, there are events and experiences that are not purposely planned within the data generation, yet naturally occur. For example, my own consumption events and experiences that draw my attention and help me reflect on my research. Such naturally occurring data is also cherished and may be included in the ‘text’ with explanations, as it reflects a researcher’s deep engagement with the research, and contribute to the understandings of the essence of the study subject. Such a form of engagement and the data
source may not be encouraged by all research approaches; but the phenomenological hermeneutics approach embraces the active role of the researcher and appreciates the deep involvement of the researcher during the conduct of the research.

3.6 Fieldwork: obtaining ‘text’
The two data generation methods provide both group and individual voices that create a balance between, and therefore offers a holistic account the study subject. The following sections will explain details of the fieldwork including timeframe, the location of the fieldwork, participants’ selection and the events of data generation. In addition, photographs were taken (with permission) to capture some of the visual richness of the fieldwork (Holbrook, 1998) as demonstrated in the appendix.

3.6.1 Time frame
I went to the field to collect ‘text’ twice; the first time was a period of 45 days in a hot summer, from 15 August to 30 September 2013, in which four focus groups were conducted; the second time was a period of 40 days from 2 April to 12 May 2014 when thirteen interviews were conducted, alongside the taking of field-notes and reflection notes on research progress. It can be seen that there was about a half year’s gap between the two phases of data generation. I view this gap as an ‘essential mediation’ period of time, where I was able to learn and reflect on the trials, to readjust and redirect the research direction, and to think through issues after the so called ‘tragedy’ from focus groups and turn this lesson into something useful in shaping the research journey.

In the research approach section – focus group this experience was described by few paragraphs, but in reality it was a much dreadful and confused couple of months’ self-denial combined with deconstruction the study. The time between my first and second phases fieldwork, technically should not be included within my fieldwork time scale. But the sentiment from the focus groups and mental engagement with the fieldwork did not stop when I left the field after the focus group. It stayed with me and I continued to write reflections on the fieldwork when I was out the field.
Nevertheless, in total 85 days in the field allow me immersion in the field and to obtain rich ‘text’. In addition, I have a natural advantage - as a native Chinese, I had over 20 years of life experience in China, which, to a great extent, helped me to become immersed into the field naturally and to conduct the fieldwork efficiently. Even during the time I was away my homeland and studying in the UK, I maintained the routine of visiting my family in Beijing once or twice a year. These casual family visits also provided inspirations and prepared gateways for my research.

3.6.2 Locating the fieldwork area

As the contextualization in the introduction has explained, this study has an interest in an urban-rural fringe context, where consumers are undergoing extensive change as a result of urbanization. As such, the location of my fieldwork was chosen and data gathered in a typical urban-rural-fringe area: Changping district, which is one of the sixteenth districts in Beijing. Changping has over 2,000 years of history since its establishment in the Han Dynasty. This district, covering an area of 1343.5 square kilometres, is predominantly mountainous (60%), the remaining landscape can be characterized as plains.

The world famous Great Wall - Badaling is located within this district and attracts millions of worldwide tourists. Historically, this district is regarded as an area with good feng shui, where emperors from the Ming Dynasty decided to build theirs tombs. The majority of the Ming tombs are located in a cluster within Chanping and collectively known as the Thirteen Tombs of the Ming Dynasty (Chinese: 明十三陵; pinyin: Míng Shísān Líng). The Ming Tombs are recognised as a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Site and thus Changping district is also a world famous tourist attraction. In 2015, Changping district tourism revenue reached over 10.4 billion Yuan ranked as the top one among the ten suburbs of Beijing (bjchp.gov.cn, 2015).

According to the latest data – the sixth national census, in 2011, the population in Changping was 1.66 million, compared with 1.05 million in 2000; within 11 years the population in Changping district had increased by 63%,
the speed of its growth is the fastest among all Beijing districts. In 2012, there were 1.83 million permanent residents in Changping, of which 0.957 million was a ‘floating’ population, accounting for 52.3% of the total. The registered population of Changping is 0.561 million, of which the ‘rural’ population is 198,000, accounting for 35.3% of the registered total (bjchp.gov.cn, 2015). Changping’s economy has been developing quickly. In 2012, its GDP reached 50 billion Yuan; the total output value of above-scale industries exceeded 100 billion Yuan; public revenue reached 5.22 billion Yuan; and urban per capita disposable income and rural per capita net income reached 29,938 Yuan and 14,967 Yuan respectively (bjchp.gov.cn, 2015).

The speed of population growth and the GDP growth mirrors the urbanization process in Changping district. There are relatively advanced areas such as Hui long guan as illustrated by figure 3.1, but also less developed rural areas on the edge of the district as seen from figure 3.2. In the urban Changping images, the development can be reflected from the modern architectural styles and the newly built skyscrapers, most of the residents in these urban areas come from the nearby rural areas and they are witness to the fast urbanization process in China; whilst in the rural areas of Changping, as the image shows, development is quite slow. I love this image particular as it reminds me my grandma’s village on the outskirts of Changping, where the houses are built near the hills, Sharon fruits trees at the back of the yard, a home-made shower system and a washing line; life in the rural areas mostly remains a simple way of life without much advanced technology.
The different development stages in Changping demonstrate that this area has an urban-rural mix of areas that are evolving, shifting and constantly changing as the result of the urbanization process, the map (figure 3.3) below shows the location of Changping district in Beijing, it is located between the predominantly rural area and the central urban area. The suburban Changping District is 42 kilometres (26 mi) north-northwest of Beijing city centre, and it is regarded as the ‘back garden’ of Beijing.
3.6.3 Selecting the participants

I used to admire researchers who were able to conduct focus groups or interviews with ‘committed ethical consumers’ and able to recruit their participants via good sounding sources such as the subscribers of *Ethical Consumer* magazine (e.g. Bray et al., 2010; Beford, 1999). *Ethical Consumer* magazine is a not-for-profit UK magazine and website that publishes information on the social, ethical and environmental behaviour of companies and issues around trade justice and ethical consumerism and it was founded in 1989 (Barley, 2010; Hunt, 2010). This magazine offers an interesting lens for Western consumers by entitling almost every single product with titles, such as ‘ethical banking’, ‘ethical energy’, ‘ethical food and drink’, ‘ethical
mobile phone’ and the ‘ethical fry up’; as such almost every category of consumer goods and services are included.

However, I realised that there is no similar magazine in China yet; and the contents and understandings of ‘ethical consumer’ can be very different in a Chinese context. The process for looking for focus groups participants’ proved such point. For instance, when I attempted to brief my participants about the research topic and its purpose, none of them (including 5 gatekeepers and 19 participants) understood the concept of ‘ethical consumption’ and none of them had even heard of it before. It became clear that the Western concept of ethical consumption is not a familiar concept to Chinese consumers, which constitutes to one of the contributions of the study. The implications of this contribution are further developed in the data chapter.

Therefore, I accept that my participants were selected as ordinary consumers who may not self-describe as ‘ethical consumers’ as the Western literature painted, nor have a distinct conceptualization of ‘ethical consumption’ as do the Western consumers who are most often studied. The participants were everyday consumers, who lived in Changping district. The method to gain focus groups participants are very similar to those used in relation to the interview participants. As such, I decided to explain the recruitment process together first and then give each phase of participant selection separate treatment as needed.

Firstly, I used my family, friends and relatives as a social network in Changping district to find the ‘gate keepers’ who were able to help me to look for suitable participants. My family has lived in this district for over five generations and its social network has been well-developed over such a long period of time. However, whilst this affords support for participant recruitment, as discussed in the previous section, it is a typical urban-rural-fringe context that was the primary drive for selecting Changping as the research site. When choosing the gate keepers, I did not have a rigid rule, but applied a relatively flexible approach. The element I was trying to avoid is the ‘sameness’ of gate keepers, for example, from the same office, same
company, and same neighbourhood. In this way it was possible to make sure the participants were an interesting mix rather than a homogeneous group. I initially selected 15 gate keepers to help me to find suitable participants. These gate keepers were from different social-economic groups, different age groups, included both males and females.

The most important characteristic for selecting participants is to mirror the ‘mix’ and ‘dynamics’ in an urban-rural-fringe context; in other words, participants were primarily chosen from different socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, participants included an attorney and a university lecturer who had relatively stable and high incomes, as well as participants who had low incomes such as supermarket floor workers, a private retailer who did not have job security and a civil servant who felt relatively secure in his job. There were also participants who have higher education experience, and even experience of studying abroad (Japan, Hong Kong), as well as participants who did not have much education at all.

The common characteristics of these participants are that they were all working (or worked) and living in Changping district for a relative long period of time; most of them were born there and have been living there almost their entire lives; the rest of them have been living there for at least a decade. They have witnessed the developing urban-rural-fringe context and they have been participating in this developing process through their own positions and roles. This district may not be big enough to represent the entirety of China or even Beijing; however, there are interesting dynamics at play in this area that mirror the on-going and evolving processes and complex dynamics in many developing areas of China. The selected participants may not be able to cover all Chinese consumers, but their experiences and their stories provide a lens to understand the meanings of ethical consumption in Chinese consumers’ everyday consumption.

I would describe the selection of the participants as being from a highly flexible approach. I did not have specific expectations about the participants. However, I was trying to maintain a good mix of different socio-economic backgrounds. I also tried to include both male and female participant
perspectives, as well as those from different ages. The important characteristic for selecting participants was that they were willing to share their stories, experiences and emotions in their daily consumption practice, and they would not mind recordings being made and or having photos taken for the research (the photo taking was optional).

I prepared brief letters to explain the research purpose and sent it to the participants preferred an email, for the participants who did not have easy access to an email, I informed them via phone calls or face to face informal chats. I noticed that a phone call or a face-to-face chat about the research purpose worked better than the brief letters as the direct communication enabled me to answer questions and doubts from the participants directly. Consent forms were also prepared for the group participants and signed by them.

There were in total 19 focus groups participants, five females and fourteen male participants, each group consisted of four to five participants. Focus groups participants can be viewed as being grouped in four age groups: Group 1 contained 4 participants (it supposed to be 5 participants, but one participant was unable to attend on the day due to a personal reason), they were young professionals aged from 26 to 30, who left University a few years ago and started to pursue their own careers, some of them were still single while others already had established a family, the connection they shared was that they went to the same primary school nearly two decades ago; Group 2 contained 5 participants, their age was from 45 to 65 were a group of workers who used to work for the same factory, but now some already retired and some are still at work; Group 3 also contains 5 participants, their age was from 31 to 44, they consisted of new parents who lived in the same neighbourhood; Group 4 included five participants, their age was from 20 to 25, they were students studying in the same University but not within the same class, this group included both undergraduates and postgraduates. As it can be observed, participants in the same group share same similarity in at least one aspect such as age, working environment and lifestyle etc, therefore, it was hoped they would feel comfortable to talk (Krueger & Casey, 2000).
For the interview participants, due to the 'story-collecting' nature of interview, I strived to maintain a relaxed atmosphere between me the interviewees, therefore there were no physical consent forms, but I explained the research purpose to each participant and make sure they understood the purpose of the interview. No single interview was forced, I only interviewed participants who agreed to be interviewed and were willing to participate. There were in total thirteen interview participants including males (9) and females (5), and the age of the participants spread from 25-64. The table below provides the profile of each participant to give a brief introduction and so that each of the participant can be seen as a character with unique features.

Table 3 Participant information for the interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Gender &amp; age</th>
<th>Participant information (occupation &amp; education)</th>
<th>Interview date 2014</th>
<th>Interview location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>M, 64</td>
<td>Manger in a local factory, Adult Professional College Degree</td>
<td>8 April</td>
<td>Rest area in local store</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>M, 42</td>
<td>Director in the government sector, Adult Professional College Degree</td>
<td>8 April</td>
<td>Rest area in local store</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>F, 43</td>
<td>Shopping mall consultant, Adult Professional College Degree</td>
<td>10 April</td>
<td>Office in shopping mall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>M, 34</td>
<td>Fried chicken shop owner, High school</td>
<td>10 April</td>
<td>Rest area in local store</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>M, 31</td>
<td>IT worker, College diploma</td>
<td>14 April</td>
<td>Participant’s home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>M, 36</td>
<td>Civil servant, Diploma</td>
<td>15 April</td>
<td>Participant’s office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>M, 33</td>
<td>Attorney, Bachelor Degree</td>
<td>17 April</td>
<td>Gatekeeper’s house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>F, 40</td>
<td>University lecturer Master’s degree (Japan)</td>
<td>18 April</td>
<td>Participant’s office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Gender &amp; age</td>
<td>Participant information (occupation &amp; education)</td>
<td>Interview date 2014</td>
<td>Interview location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>M, 32</td>
<td>Home designer, College diploma</td>
<td>19 April</td>
<td>Gatekeeper’s roof</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>M, 27</td>
<td>Nurse, secondary school with extended training</td>
<td>20 April</td>
<td>Participant’s home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>M, 32</td>
<td>Supermarket assistant, College diploma</td>
<td>25 April</td>
<td>KFC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>F, 26</td>
<td>Buyer in a local factory, College diploma</td>
<td>26 April</td>
<td>Gatekeeper’s house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>F, 25</td>
<td>Accountant in a hospital, Master’s degree (Hong Kong)</td>
<td>30 April</td>
<td>McDonald’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>F, 26</td>
<td>Employed by family business, Primary School</td>
<td>2 May</td>
<td>Local store and a supermarket</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.6.4 Focus groups conduct

Focus group conduct can be viewed as three stages. The first stage is concerned with the preparation. At this stage, the preparation includes at least three aspects. The first aspect is preparation: to develop the question guide (see below table) that would be used during the focus groups, a brief letter and the consent form to inform the participants (the brief letter and consent form can be seen in the appendix). The second aspect is preparation of the participants for the focus groups, a researcher needs to communicate with the gatekeepers (or participants directly) and decide on the most suitable location and time for the focus group conduct. The third aspect is the preparation for the facilities, including a video recorder with tripod, a backup recorder, refreshments and drinks for the participants. The video recordings were conducted with the verbal agreement of the participants.
Table 4 Examples of developing questions for focus groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethical concerns</th>
<th>Related topics &amp; purchasing</th>
<th>Examples of some key Questions</th>
<th>Examples of some specific questions</th>
<th>Examples of some general questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environment</strong></td>
<td>Organic, eco-products;</td>
<td>Are you aware of the organic product range?</td>
<td>What kinds of laundry powder or liquid do you normally purchase?</td>
<td>When was the last time you did your grocery shopping?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What's your opinion on the organic products?</td>
<td>Questions often around the purchasing of fruit, vegetables, cleaning detergent, laundry powder/liquid etc.</td>
<td>Can you remember what did you purchase in your last shopping?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Have you ever purchased organic milk/vegetables or fruit?</td>
<td>What are your considerations when purchasing these products?</td>
<td>What do you normally consider in your daily shopping?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Do you prefer organic vegetables/fruits/milk than normal?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Where do you normally purchase your grocery shopping?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Have you heard the impact of ‘Phosphorus’ on environment?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Animal welfare</strong></th>
<th>No animal test, Free-range, organic; Personal care</th>
<th>Do you care whether the product was tested on animals?</th>
<th>What do you normally consider when purchasing personal care products/ Eggs/milk/yogurt?</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical concerns</td>
<td>Related topics &amp; purchasing</td>
<td>Examples of some key Questions</td>
<td>Examples of some specific questions</td>
<td>Examples of some general questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>products, free-range eggs, dairy products purchasing</td>
<td>about the chicken’s welfare: whether in a cage or free-range?</td>
<td>How do you feel about purchasing dairy products?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human rights</th>
<th>Worker’s working conditions, Child labours; Clothes, shoes, Mobile phones,</th>
<th>Do you consider where and who produced the clothes/shoes/mobile phone?</th>
<th>What do you normally consider when you purchase clothes/shoes?</th>
<th>What’s your opinion towards companies’ claims such as donation to charities?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

It can be observed that these questions were entirely developed based on the Western major ethical concerns – concerns for environment, animal and human rights (detailed discussion can be found in the literature review chapter). It was my intention to bring the Western perspective of ethical consumption in front of the participants (although the original research purpose was slightly different as section 3.5.1 explained), so that the conversation between Chinese consumers and the Western ethical consumption can be observed. Under each Western ethical concerns,
related topics also listed based on the Western perspective, and I developed questions that associated with those Western ethical topics that might be related to the participants’ daily consumption; the aim was to bridge the conversations between the Western ethical consumption and participants’ consumption life.

Several general and specific questions were devolved to contribute the original questions protocol. The questions started from the general and moved to specific product purchase that can be traced to certain ethical concerns based on the literature review. Apart from inviting participants to share their daily consumption experience, they were also encouraged to share their feelings, thoughts and opinions towards the discussion topics. This way, the Chinese consumers’ voices towards the Western concept of ethical consumption could be conveyed from the discourses around their daily consumption activities. The questions protocol was slightly refined after each focus group to suit the participant’s interests. For example, powdered milk purchasing was fully discussed among Group 3 - the parent group, as all participants had just became parents and their powdered milk purchasing experiences encouraged them to share their opinions and ideas; while the powdered milk topic was replaced by milk or yogurt purchasing amongst the University student group.

The second stage is the actual conduct of the focus groups, details can be seen in the below table, including the date and location, duration, and the number of the participants in each group and their age range. All the focus groups were video recorded with the assistance of a friend and later transcribed. The first focus group was conducted in my parent’s house in Beijing. The original plan was to have six participants, however one participant wasn't well enough to attend, and another participant was stuck on Jing-Zhang highway for the whole morning. Although only 4 participants attended, the focus group was still conducted based on the developed guideline (Krueger & Casey, 2000). From this experience, I learnt that being flexible is very important in doing fieldwork; quite often things might not go exactly as planned. Thus, having a flexible and optimistic attitude can be very helpful in fieldwork conduct.
The first focus group already demonstrated that question guide developed based on the Western ethical concerns did not resonate well with the participants. It seems those ethical concerns were beyond the participants’ considerations in their daily consumption (details are exposed in the data chapter). Despite this, I decided to continue to try out this question guide to gauge the other groups’ responses, just in case other groups might have different perspectives or responses. Unexpectedly yet reasonably, the remaining three groups had very similar responses. Through these focus groups experiences, it turned out that the Western concept of ethical consumption was not a familiar concept to these participants; the ethical concerns and the ethical purchasing described in the literature, were mostly beyond the focus groups participants’ considerations.
The third stage is post-focus group, where I took time to transcribe the focus group conversations and to reflect on the focus group experience. The first transcription took almost 8 hours to accomplish, watching the video playing and typing at the same time with the necessary pausing and replaying, I managed to finish it before the second group started. The transcription was typed in Chinese to maintain the richness and veracity of the conversation. All the transcription was done the same way, whenever one focus group was done; the transcription was finished before the next focus group. This helped me keep a clear mind about each focus group.

As the research approach section explained, the outcomes of focus groups had three major implications for the study. Firstly, it provided the first-hand material that described the Chinese consumers’ responses to the Western concept of ethical consumption that offers a response to the dominant Western ethical consumption perspective. Secondly, it reshaped and redirected the study; and through this process it helped me shift my perspective towards the concept of ethical consumption – from a homogenous perspective to heterogeneous perspectives. It helped me realise that the Western concept of ethical consumption is not a universal concept and there is a need to understand what ethical consumption means to the Chinese consumers first before looking into further issues such as the factors or barriers in ethical consumption as the Western literature highlighted. Thirdly, it indicated that there is a need for further in-depth inquiry into the subject, thus the second phase of study – interviews were conducted and their conduct is explained in the following section.

3.6.5 Interview conduct
Fourteen interviews were conducted six months after the focus groups. The purpose of the interviews was primarily led by the question that ‘what ethical consumption means to Chinese consumers?’. Unlike the focus groups conduct that can be described in three stages, the Interviews did not have clear stages; they involve less control over the conversations compared with the focus groups discussion. Overall, the interviews can be viewed a circular motion that moving forward, each interview was different and the conversations, the questions and the styles were also different. Interviews
were conducted at agreed times and locations as detailed (table 3.1). All participants were informed of the purpose of the interview and agreed to the recording of the conversation. Guided questions were used during the interviews as they provide certain guidelines to the interview, but offered flexibility and freedom to expand on topics and gave space for participants’ stories (section 3.6.5.1 explains the question guide).

Unlike the focus group video recording method, I decided to use voice recording to create a more relaxed atmosphere as the interviewees preferred voice recording to video recording. Thus, it is necessary to introduce a small yet useful tool—my Sony ICD-PX333M portable voice recorder—it was a good and reliable assistant during my second phase of fieldwork. It was in my pocket all the time and was used to record the 13 interviews that represented over 14 hours of conversation. The focus group experiences also suggested that preparation before interviews was needed and beneficial. Preparation included topics, prompts and mental preparation. It was untrue to say I was not nervous before those interviews. The good thing about interviewing is that it enables time for exploration and returning to issues; occasionally the interview could be a bit rigid at the beginning, but the conversations normally ‘loosened up’ and became more natural after few minutes’ chat. As such, I always started the interviews with general and relaxed questions to enable the development of more naturalistic conversation.

3.6.5.1 Interview topic guide

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened” Matthew 7:7-8

The above verses from the scripture highlights the importance of asking so that one will receive what one asks for. Thus, asking questions is vital in the interviews in order to hear rich information and stories from the participants. Therefore, some important topics were developed drawn from the focus group experiences and condensed into five types of questions: general questions about the participant’s consumption life to understand the
background of any potential stories; specific questions that may refer to the Western ethical consumption and concerns to hear their views of the Western perspective; picking up on participants’ respond and to explore their primary concerns in their consumption life and, when it possible, to investigate the sense of ethical concerns and possible meanings of ethical consumption to them; bridging questions that response to participant comments and encourage them to develop further on what they have just mentioned; and last but not the least ‘free’ questions that would be on any topics that occurred during the interviews that may help to articulate the meanings of ethical consumption from the Chinese consumers perspective. Section 3.6.5.2 provides an example of some types of questions or topics used in an interview.

Above all, unlike the focus group went there was a need to balance the discussions among the group members, interviews only occurred between me and the participants. Thus it enabled me and the participants to concentrate on certain issues that might not be allowed within a group discussion; and it offers the opportunity to invite participants to tell their stories in a relaxed one-to-one conversation environment without the need to cooperate with others. It worth mentioning that the interview conversations were mainly around everyday products with a focus on Chinese consumers’ daily food and grocery consumption, however, there was no rejection when participants brought is issues related to other goods such as shoes, clothing or even vehicle purchases. The rule of thumb was always encouraging the participants to share their stories, even the seemingly irrelevant information, which might later turn out to be something useful after returning to the ‘text’.

One-to-one interviews with guided questions can be very flexible and spontaneous; it is not one-sided, but co-constructed by the researcher and the participants. Therefore, it is almost impossible to pre-design all the questions. But there are certain types of questions and topics can be prepared, for example, general questions as shown in the blow box, centred on daily consumption products. This provided an accessible starting point for conversation – and one where all participants had experience - as well as giving participants the chance to talk about the consumption activities and
experiences based on their personal lives. Further questions often developed based on the existing products that participants mentioned, to discover their concerns when they made the purchase in relation to that product class.

Table 6 General questions for interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of some general questions:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>How often do you do shopping?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Where do you normally do your everyday shopping?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When was your last shopping activity?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Would you mind telling me what you purchased in your last shop?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What were your concerns when purchasing that product?</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similar to the focus groups, there were prepared topics that act as a bridge to link the Chinese consumers’ perceptions of Western ethical consumption activities and concerns. As the table below shows, certain products or purchases could be discussed with participants. Those purchasing topics were identified in relation to certain ethical issues or concerns in the Western literature, meanwhile, these purchases were also closely related to participant’s ordinary shopping activities, such as fruit and vegetables, choice of eggs, tissues and cleaning products. It can be seen that the meanings of ‘ethical consumption’ are deeply embedded in ordinary everyday consumption activities and it can and only be articulated from these ordinary everyday consumption activities. My task was to discuss some of these purchasing topics with participants and ask about their concerns in a natural and relaxed manner.
Table 7 Examples of topics and Western related ethical issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of some topics – the purchase of:</th>
<th>Related Western ethical issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fruit</td>
<td>(fair trade/concern for workers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dairy product</td>
<td>(organic/local / environmental concerns)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toilet tissue</td>
<td>(recycling/ environmental concerns)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free-range eggs</td>
<td>(free-range/animal welfare)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables</td>
<td>(organic/local)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat</td>
<td>(free-range/animal welfare)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainers</td>
<td>(concern for worker’s working conditions)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another type of questions that I intended to ask sought to explore what ‘ethical consumption’ meant to the participants in their everyday consumption activities. Questions as shown in the table below, however, most participants were unable to provide direct answers to the level three questions. Some participants provided answers by giving stories or experiences; others commented that it was too difficult or too abstract to answer. Under such circumstance, I strived to avoid pressing the participant to think of an answer; instead, we just quickly shifted our conversation to something more conversational. Indeed, ethical consumption is a complicated topic and can be difficult for the participants to put into words, but the meanings of it can be articulated from participants expressed consumption experiences and stories.

Table 8 Examples of level three questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What does ethical consumption mean to you?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is there an ethical issue that concerns you in your daily consumption?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a consumer, are there any ethical concerns in your daily consumption?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

122
These question examples only provided a general idea for conducting the interviews, especially for the first few. However, it was move a starting proposition than a rigid framework. The interviews were much more flexible, as not all questions were needed and quite often interesting topics occurred naturally during the interviews. Occasionally, prompts were also used during the interviews to stimulate conversations, such as a fresh banana, a pack of tissues, or some images. The overall strategy for the interview was to encourage participants to describe their experiences and tell their stories of their shopping activities.

3.6.5.2 Towards a discussion of ethical consumption: “a story emerges”
A phenomenological hermeneutics approach emphasizes on details that often may be taken for granted. As the researcher, it is important to pick up on little clues in the conversations and explore them further. As the researcher when interacting with participants, I always tried to pay close attention to what participants said and to encourage them to tell me more about their stories. The French sculptor Auguste Rodin once said: “beauty is everywhere. For our eyes, not lack of beauty, but lack of discovery.” Similar to the “story collecting” process in the interviews, there was not a lack of stories if the researcher has the ears to hear. Here is an example of how interesting stories occurred in the ordinary conversations during an interview.

Interviewer: When was the last time you went shopping?

Participant: About every two to three days, I go to the supermarket. Mainly to buy dairy products…

Interviewer: What are your considerations when you purchase a dairy product, milk, for example?

Participant: Now, if I buy fresh milk. I often buy ‘San Yuan’, because they are produced somewhere near to Changping (where she lives), freshness. I always check the dates of the milk. Others (brands), I prefer, ‘Yi Li’, they are Islamic… Erm…Mengniu, I also purchased ‘Meng Niu’ previously, but I found problems a few times... So I gave up that brand.
Interviewer: Would you mind telling me a bit more about the problem you encountered?

Participant: Erm…I was not sure if the problems occurred during transportation or storage, or even if the problem was from the source. There were little cubes inside the bag of milk; water and fat were separating…

Interviewer: Did you contact the supermarket where you bought it from?

Participant: The first time, yes, I did contact them. That was back at the time when I was pregnant; we bought one box of milk and found several bags had the same problem: water and fat separating, having cubes inside. So I contacted the supermarket. But the supermarket suggested that I contact the factory directly. I then contacted the factory and found the person who was in charge in this area. Eventually, he did turn up and admitted the problem. According to their regulations or something, they made it up to me by giving me a few bags of milk. Two or three new bags of milk to exchange one bag of bad milk… [sighs with laughers] …after that I had the similar problem again... But we did not contact anybody this time. It was too much hassle. So we gave up buying this brand.

Interviewer: how did you feel about the solution?

Participant: I feel...No...[small laugh]... If we were happy, we would not give up buying this brand… this is not saying that the current brand we are purchasing does not have problems, all I can say is that there are fewer problems…

(Extracts from Interview 8)

The above is one of the examples illustrating how stories emerge as a form of ‘collaboration between researcher and participants’. It can be seen that the interview started from general questions about consumption. Once I noticed the participant mentioned dairy products, I then focused on this product range and asked further information about her considerations when purchasing dairy products’ such as milk. During the interviews, I noticed that the more specific the product was, the easier the participants founded
engage it with to the conversations. The participant mentioned ‘freshness’, ‘brands’ and also ‘problems’. By asking about the ‘problem’, the participant shared one of her bad purchasing experiences with one of the leading milk brands. During the storytelling of this bad experience, the participant revealed the event occurred at the time “when I was pregnant”, it indicated the importance of that time as she had several bad experiences, but she chose to share this particular one – the one when she was pregnant. So why this is important and what this could suggest, the data chapter (5.2.1) provides further analysis.

When considering milk purchase from a Western perspective of ethical consumption, ethical concerns may focus on the milk being ‘organic’, which may relate to caring for the environment and to an individual’s (or their ‘family’s) health, ‘local produce’ may relate to reducing the food miles or ‘animal welfare’ to how the animals are treated. It can be observed that all the three ethical concerns were absent in the participant’s answer. Although the participant mentioned about ‘near Changping’, it was purely out of the ‘freshness’ consideration. By using the Western ethical consumption standard, it may seem that this participant neither has ethical considerations nor ethical consumption practice. If the story stopped here, it may contribute to an image of ‘self-interest’ in Chinese consumers. However, the participant story about the ‘bad milk experience’ then opened a window to understand the consumption situation that she has been facing - a problematic consumption environment; and most importantly, there were hidden ethical concerns under the participant’s experience. The discussion of this example is stopped here, but further discussion about this ‘hidden ethical concern’ is presented later in the chapters concerning the findings.

3.6.5.3 Trials and lessons learned from interviews

Firstly, the original intention was to interview participants in their home, so that way we would pick on the products they already purchased and develop some conversation from these already purchased products. However, only two participants agreed to conduct the interview in their homes, the rest preferred to do the interview either in their work place, or a public place such as KFC or a gatekeeper’s house – the reason given was most often due to
time issues. I felt frustrated at that time for being unable to view their kitchen cupboard and bathroom product choices. However, soon enough I realised that it would not make a huge difference. My desire to see if their kitchen cupboard or bathroom contained any “ethical products” ceased. From my observation of supermarket product ranges and more than ten viewings of the kitchen cupboards of relatives and friends, I learnt that there are not many certified ‘ethical products’ in the local market. For example, fair trade products are widely accessible in the Western market, but were rare in the Chinese market.

Fieldwork is an interesting place where the researcher needs to have a flexible attitude towards changes and opportunities. During the thirteen interviews, three participants kindly invited me to join their shopping trips after the interviews since they knew I was keen on collecting their consumption experiences and stories. I was to happy to engage in obtaining such experiences, I was able to observe how they made a purchase and was able to talk with them during the shopping process. Form those live shopping experiences and informal chats with the participants, it provided further opportunity to extend some of the issues mentioned in the interviews. Participants were very supportive and encouraged me to use the conversations during the shopping trips.

3.6.6 Summary of fieldwork

Fieldwork is a bridge that leads a researcher’s imagination into the research ground. In the meantime, fieldwork can often turn out to be a ‘negotiation’ between a research plan and reality. While conducting the fieldwork, ‘flexibility’ was highlighted as one of the most important features. The ‘flexibility’ refers to not only being flexible with ‘time and location’, but also when meeting dead ends and trails. After conducting the focus groups, I realised the Western concept of ‘ethical consumption’ did not resonate well with the Chinese consumers, so being flexible became vital at this stage of the study. Instead of persisting with the ‘barriers’ in ethical consumption I decided to step back to explore what the meanings of ethical consumption to those Chinese consumers. As such, the research methods reflected an evolving approach and “a natural history”.
During the interviews, I learned at least three things. Firstly, talking about familiar products what participants had purchase experiences encouraged their engagement and they readily shared their relevant consumption experience. On the other hand, talking about products which were currently unavailable in the market, such as ‘recycled/ecological tissue paper’, did not take the conversation further. Secondly, topics on specific products rather than product ranges also increased participant engagement. For instance, when the question was generally about vegetables, participant answers were also ‘in general’. However, when topics narrowed down to specific vegetables, there was more chance that participants remembered a particular memory or experience.

Thirldly, topics on ‘concrete issues’ drew better responses than ‘abstract issues’. For example, participants were willing to actively share their views and experiences on actual purchasing activities, however, when it came down to the conception of ‘ethical consumption’, most participants found it was too abstract or difficult to put into words. Consumption as part of consumers’ daily life, though consumers may be able to talk about it at length, the ethical concerns that are embedded within their consumer behaviour they often find it hard to put it into words. As Lindseth and Norberg (2004) suggest, this is because human beings live and act based on their morals without necessarily knowing about them. The fieldwork experiences enriched the research journey and give ‘soul’ to the study; and the fieldwork provided a relative large amount of ‘text’ awaiting interpretation.

3.7 Data analysis: interpreting ‘text’
Data analysis in phenomenological hermeneutics is essentially about interpreting the ‘text’. The hermeneutic circle is the central concept in hermeneutics textual analysis, as section 3.4 explained, the three stages of the circle of hermeneutics reading consist of naive reading, structural analysis and compressive understanding. In my view, the hermeneutic circle sounds much more complicated from a theoretical level than it is in hands-on practice, it become something quite natural to apply. Just as it can sound quite complicated to describe the motion of how a person runs; but the fact is that quite often a human being just knows how to run naturally without the
need to be told each step of the running motion. Human beings are naturally ‘interpretation animals’; interpretation is part of the human instinct. Before we are aware of the interpretation, it is already at play.

The interpretation of ‘text’ often starts at the moment of interaction with participants, where a researcher consciously starts to make sense based on what participants say. As the conversation goes along, a researcher absorbs more information and gets a flavour of the gathered text. However, in order to make sense out of the large amount of text from focus groups and interviews, an analytic research approach needs to be undertaken (Silverman, 2011). The following section explains the data analysis approach and the hands-on analysis practice during the process. The data analysis in this study is a combination of both manual analysis and NVivo: a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) process.

All focus groups and interviews were conducted in Chinese (Mandarin) and transcribed into Chinese language based on the video and voice recordings to maintain the richness and accuracy of the language. The linguistic characteristics were also considered significant in the data analysis, as Lee (2014) suggests that it is necessary to keep the data in the original language until the very final stage of the research in order to maintain the original quality and nuances. The transcribing process was time consuming but very beneficial as it offered the chance for me to gain an overview of the text to become familiar with it. This initial reading process is often described as “naïve understanding” from a hermeneutics perspective (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

Though the literature is highly consistent as to what the hermeneutic circle consists of, there are multiple ways of doing structural analysis and there is lack of agreement on the detailed conduct of structural analysis. Structural analysis is described as ‘thematic structural analysis’ (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004), or ‘thematic analysis’ (Kafle, 2011; van Manen, 1997). The purpose of structural analysis is in both cases to identify and formulate themes. Here I decided to apply ‘thematic analysis’ after Kafle to achieve the structural analysis. The following section provides further details of thematic analysis.
conducted in this study. Comprehensive understanding is considered as the final step of hermeneutic circle, it is about understanding the text as a whole. To achieve the comprehensive understanding, it is essential to repeat this hermeneutic circle – moving back and forth to improve understanding of the text, and to grasp the essence of the text.

3.7.1 Analytic approach: thematic analysis

According to Braun and Clark (2006), thematic analysis is considered as the foundation of qualitative analysis; it provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can offer a rich and detailed, yet complex account of the data. ‘Thematic analysis’ is widely used, but there is a lack of clear agreement about what thematic analysis is and how to carry it out (e.g. Tuckett, 2005; Attiride-Stirling, 2001; Boyatzis, 1998). However, the common feature recognized in thematic analysis is that it focuses mainly on understanding the meanings of the collected data in context involving systematically identifying and describing themes or patterns in great detail (Boyatzis, 1998; Joffe & Yardley, 2004).

As such, to understand what counts as a theme is vital in thematic analysis. Based on Braun and Clarke (2006), ‘theme’ captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. Language around themes in previous research is often presented as ‘several themes emerged during the data analysis process’ (Singer & Hunter, 1999, p.67). Taylor and Ussher (2001) argue that such language denies the active role of researcher who identifies and constructs the themes. Below is an interesting comment on the language of ‘themes emerging’:

[It] can be misinterpreted to mean that themes ‘reside’ in the data, and if we just look hard enough they will ‘emerge’ like Venus on the half shell. If themes ‘reside’ anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them.

(Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997, pp. 205-6)
The above comment highlights the active role of the researcher in using initiative in constructing the themes during the data analysis process. Broadly speaking, there is no unified approach to how a theme should look, it could be a word, phrase, a short sense and even long sentence. From a phenomenological hermeneutics perspective, themes should be something that disclose meanings; therefore, a meaningful phrase or sentence is more suitable to reveal the meanings than an abstract concept. As such, themes in this study are mostly presented as a sentence, as can be observed in the data chapters.

3.7.2 Thematic analysis: hands on practice
The thematic analysis applied in this study was largely influenced by the five steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). These steps can be seen from the left column in the below table. It can be noticed that one of the key terms in these steps is ‘data set’, Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 6) define data set as ‘all the data from the corpus that is being used for a particular analysis’; and ‘corpus’ refers to ‘all data collected for a particular research project’. Based on the understanding of these key terms, these steps are useful and contain practical advice for conducting the data analysis. The right column presents the three stages of hermeneutic circle, it can be observed the five steps thematic analysis are highly reflective and consistent with the hermeneutic circle. This may help to explain the reasons thematic analysis are often applied in hermeneutics approach.
### Table 9 A comparison of thematic analysis steps and hermeneutic circle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic analysis step by step</th>
<th>Hermeneutic circle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Familiarize yourself with the dataset (note initial comments and ideas)</td>
<td>Naïve reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Generate initial codes (systematically code whole data set)</td>
<td>Structural analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Search for themes (collate similar codes into potential themes, gather all data for potential themes)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Review themes (check if themes work in relation the dataset, check for examples that do not firmly generate a thematic map/diagram)</td>
<td>Comprehensive reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Refine themes (refine specifics of each theme and linkages between them, generate propositions, look for complex associations)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, the analysis guideline does not mean that it should be followed rigidly as it also requires the flexibility in one’s own research processes. The data analysis process does not always follow a linear procedure as it appears from the above steps; as the hermeneutic circle suggests that it is a back and forth circular motion. For instance, step one is ‘familiarize yourself with the dataset’, but in the analysis process, it became clear that this step is on-going; it does not stop after the transcription finishes as the more familiar one become with the data, the easier the analysis becomes. I printed out my entire transcripts and made it into a ‘handbook’, where I could read (and reread) it on a daily basis during the data analysis process. If I was not certain about some of the contents of the transcript, I always checked the transcripts back against the original recordings to ensure accuracy. In addition, the process of searching for themes, reviewing themes and refining themes; these stages in the actual data analysis process often reoccurred and it took several attempts to arrive at the themes that most helped to disclose the meanings that serve the research purpose.
Fowling the five steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I found that step two was particular change – generate initial codes. Initially, I was overwhelmed when I was faced with piles of complicated transcription. Therefore, an effective data analysis strategy was needed. Among all the interviews, I chose the most striking interview (interview 8) and read, reread and reflected on it; focusing on questions such as ‘what this participant said’ and ‘what that means’ to generate initial ideas on themes and wrote them down. It was somewhat chaotic in the beginning, but during this questioning and meaning-seeking process, writing down the ‘clues’ and thoughts was very useful for later steps. Once some initials codes were generated, the rest of the steps naturally started to follow. This data analysis was done both manually and using NVivo; there is a function in NVivo called ‘memo’ that allows a researcher to record such a process.

Meanwhile, I started to read through all the interview transcripts one-by-one to gain an overall picture of the dataset. I also tried different ways to read. For example, instead of reading one interview after another, I focused on a particular question and searched for all the answers from the participants. This enabled me to compare and contrast participants’ responses. Whenever I was stuck at one place in the theme searching and constructing process, the following words from Wittgenstein were always inspiring: *If this stone won’t budge at present and is wedged in, move some of the other stones round it first …* (Wittgenstein, 1980, 39e, as cited in Silverman, 2013, p. preface).

### 3.7.3 Thematic analysis: with the support of NVivo

There are controversial views on using NVivo in qualitative data analysis. Some researchers hold a positive attitude towards NVivo, such as Joffe and Yardley (2012) who suggest that it allows researchers to deal with larger sets of data than manual analyses can, and to look at patterns of codes, links between codes and co-occurrences in a highly systematic fashion since retrieval of data grouped by codes is made far easier. On the other hand, there are also critical views. For example, Lee and Fielding (1995) argue that it makes the researcher focus on functional aspects, such as developing
codes and systems, the initial purpose to find and understand meanings could be ruined.

My exploration of the data with NVivo did not conflict with the manual analysis process. It was not an easy tool for me to use at the beginning just as Lee and Fielding (1995) suggested that researchers may often focus on the functions of the software rather than the analysis. However, after persisting I gained a degree of comfort and competence in using this tool; I found it has some functions that were useful and efficient. For instance, functions such as ‘word frequency’; ‘text search’ which instantly locates the word in the dataset: and ‘word tree’ which provides a direct visual display of how other words relate to the key words. These functions may not necessarily directly contribute to a theme; however, during these exploratory research processes it helped generate and develop ideas on constructing themes. For example, the role of ‘lao bai xing’ or ‘ordinary citizen’, which was inspired by using the text search function. This is highlighted in the findings chapter.

3.8 Alternative criteria for evaluating qualitative data
As many qualitative researchers have pointed out, there has been a tendency to evaluate the ‘goodness’ of a piece of research by a generic set of criteria derived from quantitative research from a positivist perspective (Krefting, 1990; Devers, 1999; Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; Northcote, 2012). The evaluation of quantitative research commonly relies on the measurements according to the ‘holy trinity’ of objectivity, reliability and validity (Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis, & Dillon, 2003, p.59). Schofield (2002) argues that applying these traditional criteria to qualitative research is not always a ‘good fit’. Northcote (2012, p.100) borrowed the ‘apple-orange problem’ to vividly illustrate this point:

Imagine a beautiful, perfectly ripe, shiny, red apple, recently plucked from a healthy mature tree growing in a well maintained orchard. Now, imagine volunteering this apple as a candidate for “The Best Orange in the World” competition. The apple would be judged by criteria quite unrelated to the apple’s natural characteristics. The apple would be
judged by inappropriate criteria such as: dimpled orange skin, capable of producing orange juice and other qualities of an excellent orange. The poor old misjudged apple, despite its excellence, would be found seriously lacking if placed in the “The Best Orange in the World” competition. No matter how “good” the apple was in such a competition, its entry is doomed to failure. The apple is not a good fit when judged by criteria used to evaluate a good orange.

This example shows the ‘inappropriateness’ of using the quantitative criteria such as ‘objectivity, reliability and validity’ in evaluating qualitative research. However, researchers such Geelan (2001, p.129) suggests that if positivist standards of validity and reliability are no longer considered appropriate by some qualitative researchers, then new standards of justification and presentation will be necessary. Guba and Lincoln (2004, 1995, 1989, 1985) are regarded as pioneers in the area of generating criteria for qualitative research; they proposed four criteria for judging the goodness of qualitative research and explicitly offered these as an alternative to the traditional quantitative oriented criteria, they are: credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability (as cited in Shenton, 2004, p. 64). The table below demonstrates a comparison of proposed alternative criteria (Guba & Lincoln, 2004) and the traditional quantitative criteria, and explains what each criterion is concerned with.

**Table 10 A comparison of traditional criteria and alternative criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (2004, 1985)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Criteria for Judging Quantitative Research</th>
<th>Alternative Criteria for Judging Qualitative Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internal validity</strong>: refers to truth about claims made regarding the relationship between two variables</td>
<td><strong>Credibility</strong>: concerns the extent to which data measures or tests what it is intended to, which inspires confidence in the “truth” of the findings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Research methods knowledge base, 2006
Traditional Criteria for Judging Quantitative Research | Alternative Criteria for Judging Qualitative Research
---|---
**External validity:** refers to the extent to which a researcher can generalize findings | **Transferability:** refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative findings are applicable in other contexts

**Reliability:** refers to the extent to which measures and experimental treatments are standardized and controlled to reduce error and decrease the chance of obtaining different results | **Dependability:** concerns the extent to which the same methods in the same context with the same participants would yield similar results

**Objectivity:** the extent to which research findings are free from the intrusion of researcher bias | **Confirmability:** refers to the degree to which the results can be confirmed or corroborated by others.

It can be seen that each traditional criterion is replaced by an alternative criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (2004). This set of criteria is regarded as a positive response to the ‘apple-orange’ debate. This is reflected by the following researchers who favour Guba and Lincoln’s four criteria - for instance, Viney and Nagy (2011); Tong et al. (2007); Driessen et al. (2005); Flick (2004); Freebody, (2003); Creweel (2002) and Patton, (2002). As such, using ‘alternative criteria in qualitative research’ has been established and practised by many qualitative researchers (e.g. Krefting, 1990; Devers, 1999; Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; Northcote, 2012).

However, what are the most ‘appropriate criteria’ in qualitative research remains a key concern (Harding & Gantley, 1998; Johnson & Long, 1999; Rolfe, 2006; Sparkes, 2001) and has created open debates in the ‘evaluation of qualitative research’. Alongside Guba and Lincoln’s (2004) suggested four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability (as cited in Shenton, 2004, p.64), other criteria for qualitative research also suggested such as trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2004), quality (Morrow,
2005), authenticity (Milne, 2005), rigorous (Silverman, 1997). Different sets of criteria were also proposed by different researchers, for example, Cohen and Crabtree (2008, p.333) suggest seven criteria; Tracy (2010) suggests eight; Mertens (2005) proposed nine similar yet slightly different criteria. Divergent views have developed on the appropriate criteria in evaluating qualitative research. It can be observed that “the criteria used to evaluate qualitative studies appear to be under just as much scrutiny as the research itself” (Northcote, 2012, p.107).

Facing the various sets of criteria, it is not an easy task to make a judgement on which should be used in this study, as different sets of criteria reflect the researcher’s epistemological beliefs. It is important to engage in a reflective and on-going discussion about how research methodologies are connected to and driven by researchers’ attitudes to knowledge (Caracelli, 2003). As such, it necessary to consider how phenomenological hermeneutics research philosophical stance construes the criteria. The central concern of phenomenological hermeneutics research is to disclose truths about the meanings of lived experience – “being-in-the-world”. Research departure from such point does not expect to find a single fundamental truth; and recognise that the whole truth can never be fully understood.

In the light of phenomenological hermeneutics research, this study is interested in obtaining individual experiences of the events rather than seeking the exact answer to what happened that could then be seen as generalizable and repeatable occurrence. Rather than to generate one single ‘truth’, the research findings reflect my interpretation of participants’ stories, which are themselves located in a particular discourse (Riessman, 1993). As such, this study has no interest in seeking “for validity in representing or making efforts in expressing one’s logically reasoned notions of how things ‘out there’ ought to work” (Webster& Mertova, 2007, p.91). It seeks simply to disclose meanings and the new possibilities for being-in-the-world. This world can be viewed as the prefigured life world of the participants as configured in the focus groups and interviews; and refigured first in my interpretation and second in the interpretation of the readers of the thesis.
In terms of the criteria in evaluating the qualitative data in this study, this research is not obliged to subscribe to a fixed set of criteria as I believe each piece of qualitative research is a unique experience to the researcher, and that experience cannot be duplicated even under a similar research context and with similar participants. However, this does not deny the necessity to evaluate qualitative data in this study. Since I do not think it is particularly useful to subscribe to a particular set of criteria, the ability to ‘pick and mix’ the criteria that helps convey the ‘goodness’ of this study is important. The central criteria I think essentially important in this study are ‘clarity’ (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008), ‘credibility’ (Guba & Lincoln, 2004; Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; Tracy, 2010), ‘transferability’ (Guba & Lincoln, 2004) and ‘carrying out ethical research’ (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008).

I deeply believe that the ‘goodness’ of research lies in the integrity of the whole research design. The criteria for qualitative data is not just concerned about data, it associates with the research project as a whole, from the research question development, literature review, initial research plan, conducting the fieldwork, showing respect to the gathered information, data analysis and finally reporting the findings. Each step plays an important role in ‘qualifying’ qualitative data. As such, this thesis embraces the messiness of the research journey, exposes the trials and lessons learned from the research process via a natural history chapter, and strives to reflect the evolving process of this study to provide the transparency of this study.

‘Transferability’ concerns the degree to which the results of qualitative findings are applicable in other contexts. The question of concern in this study is whether the findings in this study will be applicable in other contexts. The answer to this question is not a definite ‘yes’ or ‘no’, it is a contextual answer. This study’s findings might not be applicable to all other contexts. As this study is set in a particular research context (an urban-rural-fringe context) with a central interest in Chinese consumers’ lives and consumption stories, this study’s findings only reflect a ‘truth’ in such a study context. If a similar study were conducted in the most developed central Beijing City or Shanghai City, it may have a very different study results as the consumers may themselves have very different lives and the consumption environment may
be very different. However, this study provides ‘a series of snapshots’ of the Chinese consumers who live under changing dynamics of the urbanization process; thus it provides insights into a ‘moment’ of their lived life experience and their life stories where we gain understanding and meaning of ethical consumption conceived among them.

‘Credibility’ of the study concerns the extent to which data is intended to portray the research topic and thus inspire confidence in the “truth” of the findings. It is essential to understand how ‘truth’ is understood in a phenomenological hermeneutics study. Hermeneutics search for possible meanings in a continuous process; moving between the limits of dogmatism and scepticism (Ricoeur, 1976). I do not hold that we have the whole truth, nor that there is no truth at all to be found. I believe that the researcher can access truth from the ‘text’, when the researcher interprets the text that is when the truth starts to disclose. In order to arrive at a truthful presentation of the text, Klemm (1983) argues that the “one that makes sense of the greatest number of details as they fit into a whole and one that renders all that can be brought forth by the text”. This requires the research to pay close attention to the details in the text; constantly take parts of the text and in relation to the whole. Such process also reflects the invisible hermeneutic circle at play, that moving back and forth to attempt to arrive at a truthful interpretation.

This study does not claim that it represents one singular truth. A text never has only one meaning, according to Rioucer (1976), there is not just one probable interpretation. However, not all possible interpretations are equally probable to the interpreter nor the society the interpreter belongs to. Thus, it is important to consider the internal consistency of the interpretation and the plausibility in relation to competing interpretations (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). The findings in this study have their own truthful meaning, as based on the Chinese consumers’ lived life experience and stories. Although such experience and stories are continually left in the past and those consumers’ lives continue; such a story can be repeated and retold by many others. The findings of this study offers detailed descriptions that reveal these consumers’ lived life stories; those stories and life experiences woven together enable us
to gain understandings of the meanings in participants’ world, as well as
disclose new possibilities for being in the world.

3.9 Ethics in research

Ethical considerations are of prime importance throughout the research
(Clandinin & Huber, 2007, p.15). This study adheres to the University’s
Research Ethics Guide. Consent forms were prepared to inform focus
groups participants about the research purpose and the procedures. The
consent forms were firstly developed in English and translated Chinese.
Each consent form clearly explains the purpose of the research, the format of
the data generation, and participants’ right to withdraw. In addition, my
contact details were also presented on the form so that participants could
reach me and ask any questions they may have. Consent forms were only
used for focus groups. For interviews, verbal agreement was adopted
instead of consent form to suit the relaxed atmosphere of interviews. During
the initial communication with interview participants, I explained the purpose
of the interview and the anonymity and the data ownership with participants
and obtained their permission to conduct the interviews and I also had
opportunities to answer participants’ questions directly.

Ethical considerations for conducting interviews and focus groups are similar
(Homan, 1991). When selecting the participants, the researcher must ensure
that full information of the purpose and uses of participants’ contributions is
given. Being honest and keeping participants informed about the
expectations of the event and topic, and not pressurising participants to speak
is also important. Anonymity and confidentiality in qualitative research has
been emphasized by many qualitative searchers (e.g. Kaiser, 2010;
Clandinin & Huber, 2007; Corti, Day & Backhouse, 2000). To obscure
participants’ identity, pseudonyms are used. The data is stored securely and
will be deleted when no longer be required for research purposes.

When interacting with participant, Lieblich (1996) suggests that the
researcher need to have an attitude of empathetic attitude by not being
judgemental when attending to participants’ stories. Clandinin and Huber
(2006, p.15) also point out that the researcher needs to understand that “a
person’s lived and told stories are who they are and who they are becoming and that stories sustain them; such an understanding shapes necessity of negotiating research text that fully respects participants’ lived and told stories”. In other words, the researcher needs to fully respect the stories we learnt from the participants as they are their lived experience. As such, it is important to protect their identities and to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality as these stories also continue to relate to the participant’s existence and do not cease to be associated with them.

3.10 Thesis limitations
This study is an explorative; it conveys a sense of Chinese ethical consumption and also provides insights into the notion of Western ethical consumption. However, this study does not claim to represent the whole Chinese consumer view on ethical consumption. Despite the geographic constraints and small numbers of the participants, from a phenomenological hermeneutics, there is no final interpretations, in other words, my interpretations of Chinese consumers’ stories would open to further or different interpretations. Chinese consumers’ responses, which contain a variety of comments with contradictory ideas and multiple interpretations that are perhaps somewhat chaotic; the aim of this study is to convey some of their genuine stories and experiences helping to make Chinese consumers voices heard.

Secondly, the study’s results have their own temporality; the stories told by the Chinese consumers represent their past experiences; but Chinese consumers’ stories did not stop when this study stops. News stories, new experiences continue to emerge in the changing environment. With new policies and new regulations launched during the period of this study, Chinese consumers’ perception/interpretation may (or almost certainly will) change over time. As such, future research is encouraged to examine Chinese consumers’ understandings of ethical consumption - to investigate how these changes have had an impact on Chinese consumers’ perception of ethical consumption behaviour. For example, it may consider whether the new regulations on organic produce improve consumers' view of the “authenticity” of organic produce; if the food safety issues have been
addressed and how this impacts consumers’ perception of the credibility of ethically branded products.

Thirdly, this study was set in the Chinese context to gain an understanding of Chinese consumers’ responses and interpretations of ethical consumption; so the study results contains a strong Chinese characters which may not fully suit other cultural contexts. However, the study results help to add on a different perspective to the existing literature, which helps to encourage future research in understanding ethical consumption from other social contexts. This study’s small number of participants and geographic constraints are reflected in the fact that all the focus groups and interviews were conducted within one city - Beijing. Future research could gather more variety in exploring consumers from different geographic and sub-culture areas.

3.11 Concluding remarks
As the researcher, I was struggling to put a methodology chapter together, thanks to the idea of a natural history chapter (Silverman, 2014) that enables me to share the research journey and reveals the evolving research process from the research philosophical stance to research approach, from the fieldwork conduct to data analysis. Errors and trails were exposed during this journey, through those mistakes, new opportunities and new possibilities arrived that constitute my new perspectives. Phenomenological hermeneutics research philosophy acts as an ‘invisible hand’ of the study, it provides a mental framework for the research methods, provides guidance for the fieldwork and data analysis, finally it brings each part of the research conduct together as a meaningful whole.

The essence of phenomenological hermeneutics research is to “interpret”. And my interpretation is largely determined by my preunderstanding of the research subject, yet the preunderstanding was not something fixed but shifted and was bond with the growing understanding of the study over four years’ time. This natural history chapter reflects my shifting preunderstandings: from directly introducing the Western concept of ethical consumption during the first phase of the study, to this stage that
acknowledge the multiple “faces” of this concept. Such change also reflected my changing view on ‘truth’ and how to accesses it.

From this chapter’s devolvement, I learnt that the truth we are discussing is neither the whole truth nor a complete delusion. What truthful means can be illustrated from the following experience: during the interviews, when the one of participants mentioned freshly picked home-grown cucumbers, he described it as the cucumber with yellow flower on the head and prickly spikes (in Chinese: 顶花带刺的黄瓜), this expression represents the “ultimate cucumber” in the Chinese language. Yet just this literal expression of cucumber reminded me of my childhood: the vegetables from my grandpa’s garden, green beans and golden corns. Through I did not share that particular moment with the participant nor taste his cucumber, but what he said not only conveys the meaning of words but also creates a mood that resonate with me and touched a corner of my heart. I guess I would describe that this was a truthful experience to me. And I strive to convey this sense of “truthfulness” to readers of this thesis in the material that follows.
Chapter 4. When Chinese consumers met the Western concept of ethical consumption

4.1 Introduction

In the light of a phenomenological hermeneutics approach, this chapter can be seen as an interpretation of interpretations: firstly, it is Chinese consumers ‘interpretation’ of the Western concept of ethical consumption, then it is my interpretation of the Chinese consumers’ interpretations. This chapter can also be viewed as a ‘play’ that shows the ‘drama’ of Chinese consumers’ attitude, opinions and responses to the Western concept of ethical consumption. The term ‘drama’ often implies an exciting, emotional or unexpected event or circumstance. In this chapter, the sense of ‘drama’ can be observed from the Chinese consumers’ various responses, which demonstrate that the Chinese consumers come from a very different ‘spectrum’ of moral thought – that gives rise to something unexpected from a Western ethical consumption perspective (and indeed quite different from that Western perspective itself).

Essentially, this chapter not only reveals some Chinese consumers’ responses towards the Western notion of ethical consumption, but also exposes the Western moral base behind this concept, as well as the ethical concerns developed from it. Therefore, this chapter is constituted by several ‘scenes’ that are organized by ethical concerns drawn from the Western concept of ethical consumption. By putting on this ‘play’, it not only demonstrates the ‘conversation’ between the Western concept of ethical consumption and Chinese consumers, but also provides clarity and illuminates the details of the Chinese consumers ‘encounter’ with each of a Western ethical concern. Thus, it assists in achieving a sense of understanding and prepares the ground to construct the meaning of Chinese ethical consumption in the next chapter.

As the natural history chapter discussed, a phenomenological hermeneutics approach to data analysis is essentially about ‘interpreting text’. Under the guidance of a hermeneutic circle, themes were constructed by following ‘the five steps of thematic analysis’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006); the themes in this
chapter are normally presented as a phrase, or a short sentence/statement, that either tells a ‘micro’ story or reflects a type of response from the Chinese consumers towards one of the Western ethical concerns. Each theme is in essence a ‘scene’ that contributes to the bigger picture of the Chinese consumers’ responses towards the Western concept of ethical consumption. This chapter starts by describing the major impressions of the Chinese consumers towards this concept, including their views and comments in relation to the concept, followed by a detailed description of their responses to specific ethical concerns/issues. From this, a Chinese perspective begins to emerge.

4.2 Chinese consumers’ impression of the Western concept of ethical consumption: the analogy of the ‘cryptid’

One of the key impressions I have gained from data analysis is a close association with an analogy used by the participants and in particular Interviewee 1. A phenomenological hermeneutics research approach pays close attention to the ‘text’ not only what the participants said, but also how they said it for example ‘rhetorical’ expressions such as analogy. Therefore, such elements are also what a researcher looks for during the data analysis process. Lakoff and Johnson (1980), pioneers in metaphor study, point out that people often use analogies and metaphors to represent their thoughts, experiences and behaviours. Data analysis, therefore, naturally becomes the process of looking for metaphors in rhetoric and deducing the schemas or underlying themes that might give rise to those metaphors (Strauss & Qinn, 1997). Searching for metaphors and analogies is also regarded as a useful technique for identifying themes in qualitative research (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Strauss, 1997; Quin, 1996; Kempton, 1987; and Holland, 1985). The following section is an example of using the technique to search for metaphors and analogies when identifying themes.

A “cryptid” is an unidentified creature whose existence has not been scientifically substantiated (Carroll, 2009), such as the Loch Ness Monster in Scotland, Bigfoot in North America and the Chupacabra in Latin America, and ‘Yeren’ in East Asia. The term ‘Yeren’ is from Mandarin (Chinese: 野人;
pinyin: yěrén; meaning "wild-man"), and is a legendary creature said to be an, as yet, undiscovered hominid residing in the remote mountainous forested regions of western Hubei in China (Dikötter, 1997). The term ‘Yeren’ was used as an analogy to ethical consumption by a participant during one of the interviews. When the participant was asked his perception of the concept of ethical consumption, instead of answering the question directly, he said:

You asked about ethical consumption, it is just like asking about the ‘Yeren’ in the deep mountains. Have you ever seen it? Whoever you ask, nobody has seen it. Even the mountain guardians wouldn’t be able to tell you the specifics…

Only if a clear description can be provided, such as, long arms, long legs, what kind of skin colour, what kind of hair colour, clearly written down, ideally with photos, then it can be seen via newspapers, news reports, internet, then all of us can see it clearly, therefore it can be identified… (Interviewee 1)

At first glance, the analogy of ‘Yeren’ may seem have no relevance to the concept of ethical consumption. However, after consideration I realised that it is valuable in demonstrating Chinese consumers’ perspective toward the Western concept of ‘ethical consumption’. To Chinese consumers, ethical consumption is something that they are not familiar with (they are not simply unfamiliar with the Western perspective of ethical consumption, but also the sound of this concept when it is in Chinese language). As with the ‘Yeren’, the notion of such consumption is a ‘mysterious and unidentified creature’. When the participant mentioned the Yeren’s features, such as long arms, long legs, skin and hair colour, he was paralleling the ‘content’ of ethical consumption, which is unknown to him. By doing so, interviewee 1 was saying that there is a lack of a clear description of such a concept. Naming information sources and channels, such as newspapers and internet, the participant was suggesting an absence of such information in those channels at present – and as importantly a lack of individual, shared and codified meaning in China for the concept of ethical consumption.
Echoing the message from the ‘Yeren’ analogy, other participants also clearly pointed out that ethical consumption was a concept that they were not familiar with. Participants described that the concept of Western ethical consumption was ‘alien’ to them. Participants were asked: ‘have you heard about the concept of ethical consumption?’ The following extracts exemplify participants’ responses:

What does ethical consumption mean? (Participant 1, G1)

Only heard it from the briefing letter. (Participant 2, G1)

I never heard about it. I just heard about this concept from you. (Interviewee 8)

Never heard about ethical consumption. (Interviewee 6)

I just buy things, why ask about ethical consumption? (Interviewee 9)

Ethical consumption? Don’t consider that much… (Interviewee 6)

Ethical consumption, most of us are not conscious of it (Interviewee 3)

The comments above from the participants further explain the analogy. It suggests a series of issues: firstly, ‘I never heard about it. I just heard this concept from you. (Interviewee 8)’ this reflects that Chinese consumers did not have basic information and knowledge about such a concept. In line with this response, all participants in the study were not familiar with the concept of ‘ethical consumption’. Secondly, ‘I just buy things, why ask me about ethical consumption? (Interviewee 9)’; such a comment show participants were surprised by the concept of ethical consumption and did not understand it or its potential importance. Thirdly, ‘Ethical consumption? Don’t consider that much… (e.g. Interviewee 6)’; participants’ commented that ethical consumption is beyond their consideration. Finally, ‘Ethical consumption, most of us are not conscious about it (Interviewee 3)’; participants admitted that they are not conscious of this concept – and suggested that this was a ‘common’ state of affairs – the use of ‘us’ suggesting that they saw themselves as part of a larger group that were equally unaware.
This series of comments reflects the cognitive process connected to ethical consumption: information and knowledge, understanding, consideration/concerns, consciousness. It became apparent that the Chinese consumers do not even have a basic knowledge and understanding of such a concept. As such, the Western concept of ethical consumption is naturally beyond their consideration in their consumption practice, as they are not conscious of the relevant western ethical concerns – their everyday consumption experiences do not resonate with this concept – it is every sense ‘foreign’ to them. Participants’ comments further reflect that the urban-rural-fringe environment where they live largely lacks information on ethical consumption as seen from a Western perspective, including from the mass media and other sources in the public domain. If taken at face value, these Chinese consumers’ responses suggest that they live in an environment that is almost ‘free’ of the concept of ethical consumption. This however, it must be remembered only relates to the Western notion of ethical consumption as a codified and ‘separable’ consumption activity.

When considering the Western literature, where it is suggested that the concept of ethical consumption is widely spread among consumers, the attitude behaviour gap has been highlighted – this is where most consumers state they would like to purchase ethically, but few do what they say (Futerra, 2005). The attitude behaviour gap illustrates that Western consumers understand the concept of ethical consumption, and hold a positive attitude towards it, but the key issue is whether they follow their convictions (or not) in terms of their purchase behaviour. The Chinese consumers in this study do not match the description of consumers given in the Western literature, as they did not understand the concept of ethical consumption and did not state that they would like to participate in such ethical consumption. Secondly, it seems the attitude behaviour gap beyond the context of this study, as the Chinese consumers did not show clear (positive) attitudes towards the Western concept of ethical consumption due to a lack of ‘understanding’. As such, the notion of an attitude behaviour gap becomes moot.
4.3 Chinese consumers’ responses to specific Western ethical concerns

With regard to the complicated nature of ethical consumption practice, when it came to specific ethical concerns and their related activities, the Chinese consumers’ responses were varied and demonstrated considerable imagination. This latter element helps to underscore that Chinese consumers were construing meaning from within their own frame of reference (leading to some rather interesting (mis)understandings) and also simultaneously suggesting that they were able to ‘establish’ meaning within their own practices. This begins to suggest that Chinese consumers have a sense of what constitutes ethical consumption for them – but equally suggests that this is at most a ‘label’ that they adopt. The following sections provide detailed descriptions of their responses towards each specific ethical concern – derived from the rights-based Western moral vision.

As the literature review discussed, ethical consumption contains a wide range of ethical concerns and practice, and it was therefore impossible to cover all ethical practice in a single discussion or interview. The topics discussed with participants were based on the topic guide (see 3.4) developed from the literature review, and those I considered suitable to discuss with participants, given the consumption context and the relationship (or lack of it) that existed with participants. The specific topics discussed in the following sections include: Chinese consumers’ responses to ‘animal welfare’, ‘environmental concerns’, and ‘human rights’. As the introduction section mentioned, this chapter reveals the sense ‘drama’ from the Chinese consumers’ responses, particularly for the readers who are familiar with the Western perspective of ethical consumption, from here the ‘drama’ is at play.

4.3.1 Responses to ‘animal welfare’

Within the discourse on ethical consumption, ‘animal welfare’ as a specific ethical issue or concern draws on a spirit of equality and the sense of fairness that gives rise to the premise that animals have ‘rights’, just as human beings do. As the literature review explored, the ethical consumption discourse around ‘animals’ focuses mainly on the topics of ‘animal testing’
and ‘cruelty-free’. The section below reveals Chinese consumers’ responses towards these Western perspectives in relation to animals in their own consumption experiences. From this discussion, the inappropriateness of the Western ethical perspective on animal welfare is evident; such concerns do not fit Chinese consumers’ considerations - in part due to information issues and the environment they are live in – but perhaps more significantly it points to deeply rooted cultural values that impact Chinese consumers’ perspectives.

4.3.1.1 ‘Animal testing’ – well that should mean it’s safer for me
In the Western literature, those discussing animal welfare issues often use emotive language to emphasize consumers’ moral responsibility to animals (Bedford, 1999). The concept represents consumers’ sentimental feelings and an expression of affection towards animals. Given the emotive context, this section’s title may seem somewhat brutal and inappropriate. By exposing such a statement without providing the background, I would not be surprised if some were shocked by the expression of such an attitude. Indeed, such a statement may sound shocking, harsh or even cruel; however, I would ask readers to suspend their judgement until the end of this section.

Chinese consumers’ responses to ‘no animal testing’ can be seen from the early stages of focus group data gathering. During the focus group discussions, I used a prompt in the form of a pot of the Body Shop sweet lemon body butter, certificated as being a product developed with ‘no animal testing’ (in Chinese: 无动物测试). The reason for this is because the Body Shop is famous for their claim that ‘We never test on animals, and all our products are 100% vegetarian’ (the Body Shop UK official website). I used this product to ask if participants had heard of such a concept, or were aware of such a logo. However, participants admitted that they did not know anything about the topic. Interestingly, without previous knowledge of ‘no animal testing’, one of the participants spelled out her assumption:

I have never heard ‘no animal test’ before… ‘Does that mean it’s safe or not safe? Like the medicine test, for instance, if it’s tested on
animal, it will list the possible side effects… so; animal tested products should be safer for me (Participant 2, G3)

The above comment shows that this participant had no knowledge of the assumptions that underlie the ‘no animal testing’ claim. Most interestingly, what participants said was directly contradictory to the ethical concerns for animals as presented in the Western literature. Rather than having concern for animal welfare, participants highlighted ‘safer for me’, this centres on participants own welfare. It may paint an image of self-interest or even a selfish Chinese consumer. However, focusing on the word ‘safer’, we can observe that the participants assumption centred on the notion of ‘safety’. This highlighted ‘safety’ issues in consumption echoes Mercier’s (2010) argument that China’s food safety problems have recently been a pervasive issue and this focus on ‘what is safe’ may extend beyond food to other products used on the body or in relation to it.

The response from the participant arguably mirrors the most crucial consumption issue in contemporary Chinese society – that of product safety. Where such a concern is at the ‘front of mind’ of many consumers – it is unsurprising that there is a propensity to associate the notion of ‘testing’ with additional safety. In addition, given that the product is a ‘cosmetic’ the notion of ‘animal testing’ could reasonably be connected to that used in the pharmaceutical industry. From this, it then does not become too large a leap to see the notion of ‘no animal testing’ as a warning, not an ‘ethical assurance’ (although this is at odds with the intended message) and that Chinese consumers might look for products that are tested on animals as it suggests that the product has been through more ‘thorough testing’, thus inferring less risk in its consumption to those Chinese consumers.

Interestingly, the participant’s assumption that ‘animal testing should be safer for me’ was not accidental or simply an intuitive leap of logic. Rather it can be associated with the Chinese government’s legislation regarding personal care products. It is compulsory to test products on animals to ensure they are safe in the Chinese market (Lin, 2013). Brands such Estee Lauder and Mary Kay have abandoned animal testing in the Western markets for many years,
but in order to sell their products in China, they had to resume animal testing to meet Chinese regulations. This may also help to explain participants’ response to ‘no animal testing’. In addition, animal welfare related information and education are largely absent in the environment where participants live. Thus, ‘no animal testing’, as understood in the Western literature, is alien to Chinese consumers – their responses demonstrated that this is not a concept with which they are familiar.

4.3.1.2 Questions about the effectiveness of animal testing
Participants’ responses towards ‘no animal testing’ were not homogenous however. Some participants hold on the notion of ‘safety’ as the above section demonstrated; while others were more interested in the practical implication of animal testing, such as the effectiveness of the test. During the discussions on ‘no animal testing’, one participant raised an interesting question about the effectiveness of ‘animal testing’. Below are some extracts from interview 4:

   Interviewer: Have you heard about ‘no animal testing’?

   Participant: no… what kind of products? Food or something else?

   Interviewer: for example, skin care products.

   Participant: this ‘animal testing’, will it work for humans? Will it be accurate? Medicine may be associated with it. If you put some moisturiser on a cat’s or rat’s face, will it absorb?

This is another point raised by the participant: instead of empathizing with animal welfare, the participant raised the question of ‘will it work for humans? Will it be accurate?’ This highlights that the issue is understood differently, here it is seen as a technical or scientific problem – one where ‘veracity’ or ‘efficacy’ are questioned. This may lead to arguments that centre on the ‘sense’ of such testing if it lends little basis from which to judge safety for humans, this could then lead to considerations of the ‘necessity’ (and in more emotive terms – cruelty) associated with animal tests with little ‘human’ benefit.
However, this is extension of the potential logic – and does not reflect the position of the participant, here the ‘human’ (referring to consumers) is the central concern. Linking back to the previous comment that ‘animal testing should be safer for me’, both of these comments centre on ‘self-interest’ as a consumer. They show that Chinese consumers’ current focus is ‘self-concerned’ and that animal welfare in a Western conceptualisation is something that is metaphorically and literally ‘beyond’ their current consideration – none of their comments relate to the primacy of the animal nor suggest a concern for its treatment – the rights of the animal are not foregrounded. The intention here is not to present a value judgement – but rather to highlight that the viewpoints, concerns and issues faced in the different markets lead to altered frames of reference from which consumers derive their relative positions and mental schema.

4.3.1.3 Why not use laboratory rats?
The two sections above may paint the image of ‘self-centred’ Chinese consumers who do not give much consideration to the treatment of the animals. Here, the section title goes even further – it seems that it is not just that Chinese consumers might neglect the treatment of animals, but also suggests that it is conversely appropriate to test products on animal such as rats. Now though this may irritate some animal lovers and animal activist groups, once more I ask readers to suspend their judgement till the end of this section.

Animal welfare issues cannot be fussed about much; isn’t the purpose of a little lab rat for experimentation? (Participant 1, G4)

Before we use for humans, it is normally tested on animals. If we don’t test on animals, then should we test on humans directly? (Participant 4, G4)

These comments from participants suggest that it is ‘normal’ to test products on certain animals, which is contradictory to the position adopted in the Western literature on animal welfare issues under the umbrella of ethical consumption. As participants suggested, it is not perceived as cruel to test products on ‘little white rats’ as the ‘purpose of being’ for that animal is to be
a vehicle for testing. Following this logic, it seems normal and ordinary to test products on certain animals as ‘it exists to justify itself’. Once more, this reflects that ‘animal welfare’ is not considered by the consumers in China in the same way.

The three ‘senses’ from the above sections, demonstrate three different discourses of animal welfare among Chinese consumers, yet they all points to similar issues. Firstly, Chinese consumers are not familiar or sensitive to the language around animal welfare such as ‘no animals testing’, and therefore lack awareness (and thus understating) of the issues behind the slogan ‘no animal testing’ and the moral position it comes from. This, in a way, from the surface level suggests that ‘animal welfare’ has not be given much attention in Chinese society, either from Chinese legislative aspects or in terms of treatment in mass media channels.

The above discussion around Western conceptualizations of ‘animal welfare’ also demonstrates that it is not within Chinese consumers’ considerations at this stage. Chinese consumers did not have even an initial conception of, or information in relation to, this ethical concern. A personal story helps to illustrate my point of view here. The story is about the ‘meat eater and the monks’. Two years ago, I visited temples in the famous Buddhist Mountain, Wutai, in China. From there, I learned that monks in Tibet are meat eaters. It was a shock, as I had firmly believed that all Buddhist monks were vegetarians. The explanation was that the monks who live in Tibet need to eat meat is because the climate and environment are not vegetable and fruit ‘friendly’. Particularly in the cold winter days, if monks do not eat meat, they would not have any other food source. It was simply an act in response to the environment to be able to survive. Similarly, Chinese consumers’ responses also reflect their interaction with the environment they live in.

Compared with Western consumers, who are exposed to information about ‘animal welfare’, and surrounded by emotive language such as ‘cruelty free’ and the ‘leaping bunny’ logo, Chinese consumers’ responses to ‘animal welfare’ issues a reaction to their specific and particular environment. This environment is one where ‘animal testing’ is considered normal, and the
animal welfare issue gains any hardly attention in the public domain; little consideration is given to animals, as consumers’ concerns are directed to their own welfare. When consumers live in different environments and are surrounded by different information, the same issue can be perceived very differently.

4.3.1.5 Implications: Human and animal relationship in Chinese cultural values

Looking beyond the legislative and information issues in the Chinese environment, Chinese consumers’ response towards animal welfare reflects deeply rooted cultural values. It mirrors a discourse between the contemporary Western moral position and a reconstructionist Confucian moral vision in relation to their understanding towards human and animal relationships. And the central debate of this discourse can be summarized by three questions: ‘do non-human animals have rights?’ ‘why do non-human animals deserve protection?’ ‘what are the relationships between human and animals?’

On the one hand, the concept of animal welfare presents the rights-based Western moral idea that animals have privileges, just as humans do. The concept of animal welfare is an example, here ideas of ‘fairness’ and ‘equality’ are extended to consumption. It also reflects the sense of social justice in relation to animals in the West. On the other hand, Chinese consumers’ responses reflect their connection with Chinese cultural values, to a large extent, Confucian moral teachings still speak to modern Chinese consumers, here, animals’ lives are not as valuable as humans – and they see animals as a possession – implying that the human is in the dominant or governing position. Thus, Chinese consumers do not perceive that animals have rights or should be treated as having rights.

The fundamental differences in the moral base between the West and the Chinese, offers explanations that ‘animal welfare’ as understood in the Western literature is one of the most difficult ‘ethical concerns’ to communicate to the Chinese consumers. Their responses genuinely reflect that ‘animal welfare’ as defined in the Western literature is not considered as
an ethical issue in Chinese consumers’ everyday consumption. From here, we can learn that simply imposing a marketing message such as ‘no animal testing’, as one of the ethical consumption concerns to Chinese consumers is not sufficient to uncover their position in relation to this issue.

As such, it is crucial to acknowledge the difference between Western and Chinese consumers’ moral source. Namely, the influential thinking of rights-based moral position from John Rawls in the West and in China notions of humans’ relationship to animals (being part of nature), the purpose of animals and the notion of assuring their safety and the sense that animals provide a ‘recourse’ are interwoven in Chinese consumers’ comments related to ‘animal welfare’. Thus rather than suggesting that there is ‘no’ understanding of animal welfare – what begins to form is the notion that the idea is one that is ‘different’ to the Western – but not one that is bereft of ‘ethics’.

4.3.2 Responses to ‘environmental concerns’

Compared with discussions on ‘animal welfare’, the conversations around environmental concerns were slightly different. Unlike topics on ‘animal welfare’ where participants had little to act on as a point of reference, topics surrounding environmental concerns were relatively well-understood by participants. However, Chinese consumers understanding towards the subject did not make the communication easier, in the contrast, it took considerable effort to be able to develop a discourse around the topic of ‘environmental concerns’. This was because there is a strong sense of ‘emotional pain’ in relation to environmental issues among Chinese consumers, and it was inevitable for them to spell out their concerns over air pollution in China.

When talking to participants about their environmental concerns and related topics, it was inevitable that the air pollution problem in China would be raised, especially when the research took place in Beijing. Participants naturally showed their emotions and worries towards air quality and the environment they live in. The following interview extracts may help to give a flavour of the environment where participants’ live. During an interview, I
asked one participant if he would prefer environmentally friendly washing powder, instead of responding to my question, the participant redirected the topic to the air pollution problem.

Participant: Since you mentioned about ‘environmentally friendly’ related issues, I must ask you this first, have you heard the term ‘toxic fog?’ …Between spring and winter, the poisoned fog was covering the entire Changping district...

Interviewer: yes, I heard about it.

Participant: Now, it’s already much lighter than it was…When it was heavy, I could not see 10 meters ahead. The environment became like that… bad, really bad, Horror! …The sun, just a tiny little white spot… [Sighs]…. you know that there is a popular satire on WeChat [a Chinese social network]: I opened the curtain this morning and for a moment, I thought I was blind… and I often felt that way… The quality of the environment is getting worse, so do our people. Nobody seems to care, or be able to do anything to change the situation, if our government is just sitting there and watching … (Interviewee 11)

The extract above is one of the examples that reflect that environmental issues are certainly of high importance to Chinese consumers. The participant expressed his worries and a detailed description about the environmental problem was highlighted; it was not just bad or server, but a ‘horror’ to the participant. And such ‘horror’ caused ‘pain’ when considering the environment and the consumers who live in. Participants’ comments certainly show concern over environment, but this does not necessarily suggest that they ‘buy into’ the idea of environmental friendly products. Under such circumstances, what is it that Chinese consumers say regarding ‘environmental concerns’ in consumption behaviour?

4.3.2.1 There is no genuine organic in China!
One of the most commonly discussed topics around environmental concerns in ethical consumption is ‘organic’ related consumption practice, since ‘organic’ suggests that it is friendly on the environment. During the interaction
with the Chinese consumers, ‘organic’ turned out to be a very suitable topic to discuss, as organic is most associated with fruit and vegetables – household shopping essentials to the consumers. As such, there were abundant discussions around ‘organic’ and from these discussions, it became apparent that ‘organic’ was not an alien concept to the participants. However, knowing this concept does not necessarily lead to their positive response towards it. Here are some extracts from participants:

Although some boxes have organic labels on them, I’m not convinced of what is really inside the box…real organic or fake organic…cannot tell…’ (Participant 2, G1)

There is no genuine organic in China! Organic [certifications] are very strict on growing conditions… the soil... And growing methods… it requires much effort and the produce is little. There is no regulation on organic [produce], so who is stupid enough to do real organic if they can get away with conventional ones wearing an organic label? (Interviewee 5)

The comments above really got me thinking and reshaped some of my pre-understandings. Previously, when dealing with the Chinese consumers’ impression of the Western concept of ethical consumption - as seen in the previous section on Chinese consumers’ responses to animal welfare - a strong sense of ‘alien’ and ‘unfamiliar’ was at play. As such, a lack of information and knowledge seems to play an important role in Chinese consumers’ perception of the concept of ethical consumption. If the concept of ethical consumption was well understood by Chinese consumers, then it should resonate with them naturally. However, participants’ comments on ‘organic’ broke my illusion that knowledge and understanding would give rise to a favourable perception.

‘Organic’ is not a strange concept to the participants yet ‘familiarity’ does not lead to consumers having a positive perception of organic produce. In contrast, participants’ comments demonstrate a high level of scepticism and a cynical view towards organic labels. From here, I realized that ‘information and knowledge’ are not the fundamental issues; there is something
underlying reasons still waiting to be found. So I moved on, reconsidered and re-examined, the term certification and regulation stuck out this time, their use suggests that there is lack of state legislation in organic produce, and this can be linked to the discussions on ‘legislation’ in the animal welfare section. Both of the cases suggest that laws and legislation are important in the structure of the system, which orientates and guides consumer behaviour and shapes their understanding about ethical consumption.

I thought I had got it, yet I was not quite there. One day during my lunch break in the second fieldwork phase, I learned about new legislation on organic produce from a TV broadcast by BTV (Beijing Television) News by chance. The new legislation on organic management and standards officially started from 1st April 2014 in China. Referring to what participants said, it is clear where participants’ questions and doubt come from, as before the legislation, there were no state standards about organic classification. Now that the legalisation has been established, it is not reasonable to continue to blame the lack of legislation further; however, the participants’ view towards organic food did not change after the legislation launched. So that altered me that my previous analysis and led me to view that I may have overly emphasized the law and legislative aspects and missed something more fundamental.

I held on to these thoughts while reengaging with participants’ comments and linking them back to the literature review to try to see if I can find any hints on what I had overlooked. I remembered that during the literature review, I learnt that consumers tend to hold a sceptical view towards ethical consumption behaviour (Bray et al., 2010), so it seemed to match well. Perhaps, this can be compared with the studies in a Western context. For example, Bray et al. (2010) conducted their study in the UK where the EU regulations around organic produce were relatively well-established. Yet UK consumers hold sceptical views towards organic labels. At this point, Chinese and Western consumers seem to share something in relation to their cynical perspective of organic labels.
The high level of scepticism and cynicism from Chinese consumers highlights that there is a lack of trust: Chinese consumers do not trust labels even when legislation was present. This suggests that not only do Chinese consumers not trust the labels, but they also feel they cannot trust the bigger system. Trust in Chinese is 诚信, and this cheng-xin is regarded as one of the most important virtues in traditional Chinese cultural values; this position derives particularly from Confucian teachings. Thus, it became clear that the comments from the participants’ point to the fundamental issue in the Chinese consumption, that is the lack of cheng-xin and their call – if not implicit assumption - that there should be cheng-xin.

In addition to the trust issues, Chinese consumers’ discourse of organic opened a new discussion that was worthy of additional consideration. Organic vegetables are normally around 20-25 RBM per 500 grams in supermarkets such as Carrefour and Wal-Mart. Organic branded vegetables are considered ‘high-end’ products, which can be ten times more expensive than conventional vegetables (Yu, 2011). As the participant below suggested, even if she desires organic products, the expensive price simply places it out of her means. Therefore, participants raised the following questions:

So why are so called ‘ethical products’ – such as organic so expensive? If we all purchase so called ‘ethical products’ which is way more expensive than the ordinary ones, in a way, we are encouraging the higher price on this type of products. If we can have access to reasonably priced ‘ethical products’, then ordinary products will automatically lose in terms of the competition… (Participant 3, G1)

Why call some products ‘ethical products’? If all products are made ethically, then there is no need to justify what are ethical products, right? Is it similar to a Chinese saying: a thief shouts catching the thief (Participant 3, G1)

The questions participants raised helped to reflect on the current ethical consumption stereotype: why ethical products should necessarily be more expensive, and why consumers cannot have access to reasonably priced
ethical products? In Chinese consumers’ minds, it is not good to buy organic produce as it encourages price increases in the long term, there is a danger that ‘ethical’ logos would simply engender ‘premier pricing’. Because the product is made ethically, therefore, it requires the consumers to pay more – that is also often present in the Western literature premises. However, Chinese consumers questioned if such a requirement is itself ‘ethical’, and provided the hypothesis that if all products are made the way it should be, then there is no need to separate out ethical products – as they all would be normatively.

The participant borrowed a Chinese idiom to express his view on organic and ethical products. A thief shouts catching the thief (zéi hǎn zhuō zé, 贼喊捉贼: 做贼的人喊捉贼。比喻坏人为了自己逃脱，故意制造混乱，转移目标，把别人说成是坏人). It is a metaphor that bad person did bad things but tries to absolve himself of blame or punishment, therefore deliberately creating confusion, transferring the target to someone else, and stating that it was the others’ fault. The Chinese idioms is not only a very interesting expression; but also suggests deeper concerns around the Western notion of ethical consumption. Who is the thief? What has been transferred to whom? By using this Chinese idiom, the participant indirectly suggests that the business is the thief, and it should be their responsibility to be ethical producers, but they deliberately create confusion and transfer the ethical responsibilities to the consumers.

4.3.2.2 That is the government’s responsibility!

Moving away from the discourse around organic products, another product range that associates with environmental concerns - energy saving fridges was brought up by the participants. During the first focus group, energy saving fridges were mentioned as an environmental friendly product. Participants frankly admitted their approval. For example, ‘of course favouring energy saving fridge’ as ‘it saves energy; hence saving on the electric bill (Participant 2, G1)’. Such a response indicates that participants purchase of energy saving products were a result of ‘self-interest’ rather than out of consideration for the environment.
If there were only energy saving fridges on sale by law, then people wouldn’t purchase the other alternatives. (Participant 3, G1)

If the fridge uses Freon, which is obviously harmful for the ozone, so why does the government still allow its sale? (Participant 3, G1)

From the two comments above, the phrase ‘by law’ and ‘government’ stand out. It can be seen that from participants’ views that such issues should be considered by the government, rather than be the purview of individuals. ‘We are only doing what government allows us to do (Participant 1, G1)’. This can be linked to another comment from focus group 2, when the topic of air pollution and private vehicles was discussed.

Bigger emissions, of course, more pollution. But some people just enjoy the bigger emissions and they gain joy from the noisy sounds of the exhaust pipe. Yesterday, the news reported that groups of young people were drag racing in the centre of Beijing city; their exhaust pipes were very wide! And the sounds were very loud! Where is the policeman? Would anyone stop them?... (Participant 3, G2)

When the participant was describing such a situation, mixed emotions of anger, frustration and disappointment could be read from his tonality and his facial expression. At the end, the participant questioned ‘where is the policeman?’ and ‘would anyone stop them?’ It can be observed that the policeman was the ‘go to’ answer in this situation. Who was the ‘anyone’? This can be understood as ‘anyone’ who has the ability to stop them. It seems evident that the answer is in this participant’s previous question - the policeman. The policeman here is a part of government machine and also a symbol of power. When the participant raised this question, he clearly showed his opinion that it is the government’s responsibility to take care of such practices; as an individual, ‘all that I can do is shake my head [said as a long sigh]...‘ (Participant 3, G2)

Again, the extracts above show a contrasting image between perceived individual power and perceived government power. It illustrates that governments are perceived as extremely powerful machines that have
considerable responsibility for taking care of environmental issues. Faced with such a gigantic government machine, participants put themselves on the side-lines and do not mention their role and responsibility as a consumer. In the following section the concept of the 'Lao baixing' offers some insights into how the Chinese consumers perceive themselves in relation to their role in the consumption system.

4.3.2.3 I am just a ‘Lao baixing’

The term ‘Lao baixing’ (in Chinese: ‘老百姓’) was used many times by participants when they referred to themselves in certain conversations. The term ‘Lao baixing’ has been used over thousands of years in Chinese history, but it was not included in the early editions of the most authoritative Chinese dictionary – Cihai* (辞海; literal meaning: sea of words). The Cihai is a standard bibliography of Chinese reference works. It is a large-scale Chinese dictionary and encyclopaedia. Given that such an ancient term was not included in the largest Chinese dictionary makes it even more intriguing. The most recent Cihai gives the following description of ‘Lao baixing’:

Baixing (Chinese: 百姓; pinyin: bǎixìng; literally: "hundred surnames" or 'Lao baixing' (Chinese: 老百姓; literally: "old hundred surnames") is a term in Chinese meaning "the people", or "commoners". The word ‘Lao’ (Chinese: 老; literally: "old") is often added before "baixing" to give the term a more affectionate tone (Lee, 2003).

I feel the dictionary explanation is somewhat rigid and lacks depth. In order to understand the richness of this term, it is necessary to look back to its historical context. During the feudal era, the title ‘Lao baixing’ was used to describe the ordinary people who were outside of the ruling class. So when people call themselves as ‘Lao baixing’, it is a humble way to refer to oneself. It was suggested using such a term is an expression of the spiritual compensation from the dominant class. This can be seen from previous president Chairman Mao’s articles - An analysis of classes in Chinese society (1952), in which he used language such as the ‘Lao baixing meekly accept their fate being ruled by the rulers’. By using this term, it shows that
one is being controlled and ruled. There is some criticism about using such term, as such the title of ‘Lao baixing’ automatically neglects the rights of citizens and relinquishes a large part of their rights. It further suggests using such a title shows ordinary people put their hopes on a handful of the more ‘enlightened’ rulers.

The Chinese academic view is that ‘Lao baixing’ is a historical term. However, such terms were used frequently by participants during the focus groups and interviews. I have been unable to find a good English translation for ‘Lao baixing’. A possible English translation for ‘Lao baixing’ could be ‘ordinary citizen’. Unfortunately, a loss of meaning is inevitable in the translation, so I have decided to keep ‘Lao baixing’ as the term – as ‘ordinary citizen denudes the term of most of its inferred meaning. Such a name conveys being one of the hundreds, being ordinary but feeling content, being one, part of the whole. ‘Lao baixing’ is such a deeply rooted concept into generations of Chinese, it is a term associated with having no power but also a kind of ordinary, steady, traditional, reserved, and obedient behaviour. It is a humble term that shows the spirit being content; it is almost described as a state of being where one has no significant power, yet feels content and happy.

The reason for explaining the issues surrounding the term ‘Lao baixing’, is to provide an idea about how this term was used (and reused) by participants when they referred to themselves. NVivo software was very helpful in searching the key text ‘lao baixing’. Instead of searching each transcript and highlighting each manually, I ran a query in NVivo through ‘text search’, the results instantly show that the term ‘Lao baixing’ was used over fifteen times in all the transcripts, it was used by two focus groups and four interviewees. The following situations show how participants it

Participant: I feel... Environmental issues, may not be something for us to consider, it is not our ordinary Lao baoxing’s problem...

Interviewer: So what Lao baixing do you normally consider?
Participant: Lao baixing considers the real deal. Nutrition, suitable price. In the past, seeking a cheap price; nowadays, also looking for good ingredients. Who doesn’t want to buy nice things?

Participant: Rich people should learn from the common Lao baixing.

Interviewer: What can they learn?

Participant: To learn that kind simple, humble and honest spirit (in Chinese: 朴实的精神) (Participant1, G1)

Participant: You say about this environmental protection, in order to make Lao baixing realise this problem. There is still a long way to go. This needs time... Our country’s legislation, conduct and actually doing. These aspects are not paid enough attention.

...You see the environmental protection: ‘rubbish classification’. Our Lao baixing do have not such awareness. Who actually classifies their rubbish? (Interviewee1)

It is interesting to see that when participants express his/her ideas, they did not just express the view as an individual; instead, participants were in the habit of talking for a group of people. Participants tended to use ‘we’ when expressing a personal view; and the term ‘Lao baixing’ was naturally used by different participants to show that it is not just ‘my’ case, it is the case of all ‘Lao baixing’ and I am just one of them. When the participant mentioned rubbish classification, it was obvious that he understood that it was the right thing to do, but that nobody is doing so - including him. ‘Lao baixing’ seems a very ‘safe hat’ to wear when confronting individual responsibility.

Or perhaps, this ‘Lao baixing’ hat could turn into a shield, and this shied can help individuals defend themselves from all kinds of issues and responsibilities that they may not wish to confront. At such moments, the ‘Lao baixing’ identity seems to naturally shift responsibility to the powerful ruler [the government machine]. It can be observed that such a term was used to suggest less power and less responsibility – distancing the consumer
and requiring response from those in power as the primary in responders to the concern.

Participants’ comments have vividly demonstrated the perceived relationship between themselves and the government. The government is perceived as a powerful machine, which is ‘above’ individuals, and the individual seems less influential in front of such a strong apparatus. Before the powerful machine, consumers seem ‘powerless’. Although consumers can see the problem and understand the right thing to do, they would rather leave it to those who have more powerful hands to shape a response. They wait for government policy, regulations and then they will obey. They do not see their actions as directing policy – but as responding to it. Notions of collective voice and power are put aside – consumers conform; they do not shape.

4.2.3.5 Implications: rethinking environmental issues in the Chinese context
The discussions above illustrate Chinese consumers’ responses to environmental concerns in consumption. Through those responses, we learn that environmental concerns as part of the ethical consumption are understood by the Chinese consumers; however, the concerns for the environment are not necessarily associated with organic purchasing as there is a lack of trust in organic labels, as well as the consumption system. Ethical consumption to Chinese consumers cannot be simply introduced through buying products with the label ‘organic’, there are more fundamental issues that need to be considered; otherwise the danger could be turning ethical consumption into merely a marketing ‘green-wash’ to sell to Chinese consumers.

During the discourse around environmental issues, a sense developed that Chinese consumers are quite different in the ways they perceive themselves from the consumers described in the Western literature. The reoccurrence of ‘Lao baixing’ in Chinese consumers’ comments constitutes a sharp contrast to notions of ‘empowerment’ by Western consumers’. It seems that the Chinese consumers do not desire this kind of empowerment. Without a position where the consumer feels ‘empowered’ and sees it as part of their
responsibilities of choice, it is difficult to see how some of the issues raised in this section will take root in Chinese consumers’ consumption behaviour.

It seems evident that the consumer empowerment reflected from the Western literature is not present in the current study context. Chinese consumers are not aware of the notion ‘consumer empowerment’ and they have a tendency to look to the government for action and consequently play a passive role as a consumer. In addition, I argue that the idea of Chinese consumer empowerment is still in its infancy. The very idea of a consumer movement did not occur in China until the late 1980s, which is when the Chinese Consumer Association was established (1984). Chinese consumer protection law, as a particular field, was not launched until 1994. Compared with Western countries, for example, in terms of consumer protection, in the UK this can be traced back to a series of laws passed in the 1950s and 1960s. Given its relatively contemporary base, it can be observed that Chinese consumer awareness and consumer development started quite late compared with that evident in the Western world.

The ‘government machine’ has emerged as the corollary of ‘Lao baixing’. From the participants’ perspective, it shows that the Chinese government is perceived as a powerful machine that has the duty to look after the environment, to set law and regulations to protect the environment, and the role of being a Chinese consumer is reduced to simply obeying those rules. With a governmental and regulatory orientation naturally formed, and under such conditions, the active role of consumer and consumer rights are given up. The current perception of the Chinese government orientation in the consumption system has historical and cultural roots: obedience is a principle within the Confucian’s civil society, and its impact is inimical to the Western notion of consumer empowerment.

4.3.3 Responses to ‘human rights’

In essence, human rights are concerned with people. In the subject of ethical consumption recorded in the Western literature, human rights are often applied to address working labourers’ welfare. By looking at production
processes, various issues have been addressed, such as working conditions and child labour. The idea of applying the notion of ‘human rights’ to ethical purchasing behaviour, is similar to the notion of ‘animal welfare’, as it based on the moral foundation of ‘rights’. Working labourers, in particular child labourers deserve protection of their human rights. As such, this perspective emphasizes that consumers look beyond the final product, viewing the product as the entirety of the production process.

To a large extent, Chinese consumers’ responses to ‘human rights’ echo their response to ‘animal welfare’. There is lack of attention and interest in the subject. For example, when talking about ‘child labour’ issues, participants said that there is no way to know if the products are made by children. For example:

All the information I know about this garment is from the label. What can I see from the label? Material, cleaning methods, and maybe the company’s name and address. But there is no way to get to know ‘who’ it is made by and under what kind of working condition…The big social environment does not address such issues. Just being a consumer, we have no channel to know such information. Gradually, such issues are just being neglected; nobody pays attention to it.

(Interviewee 13)

This comment from the participant highlighted a number of issues related to child labour. Firstly, the participant suggested that there is inadequate information about production. When participants purchase a garment for example, s/he does not have a channel to learn about the worker’s situation and conditions. As the literature suggests, only when consumers are informed by such information can they consider this in their consumer behaviour. Secondly, this also relates to the ‘transparency’ issue in ethical consumption practice, where companies actively provide and present information about the production process to consumers. According to participant responses, we can see that such ‘transparency’ was not practised by the businesses in China. Thirdly, as the participant suggested, the ‘child labour’ issue has not been raised to public attention in China – and to a
degree are even ‘neglected’ – hidden perhaps from exposure either by intent, or more likely through inattention.

Similarly to ‘child labour’, one of the participants referred to ‘working conditions’ as a cold subject’ (in Chinese: 冷门话题). Participants suggested they are not familiar with the topic and they had hardly heard anything about it. Again, this is in line with participant’s responses to ‘animal welfare’, which can be linked to information and knowledge issues in ethical consumption behaviour. The outcome of a lack of relevant information and knowledge was ignorance, such that participants do not care about/consider such issues in their consumption practices. Among participants’ comments, there was an interesting response to ‘sweat shop’ clothing:

Interviewer: Have you heard about ‘sweat shops’? How about clothes made in a ‘sweat shop’?

Participants: after we buy it, we will wash it first. (Participant 2&3, G3)

‘Wash it’. This is the answer participants provided to deal with ‘sweat shop’ made clothing. ‘Sweat shop’ in English is a pejorative term for a workplace that has socially unacceptable working conditions. ‘Sweat shop’ translates as ‘blood and sweat factory’ (in Chinese: 血汗工厂). Participants interpreted it literally; therefore, they thought it was necessary to wash the clothes before using them. On the one hand, it shows the Chinese consumers are practically minded; they tried their best to find a solution within their own ability ‘to wash off the sweat’. On the other hand, it shows that the Chinese consumers have no real understanding of the broader issues at play – let alone the ethical concerns that might be associated with them.

4.3.3.1 ‘Child labour’ is normal

Child labour issues have been given considerable attention in the Western world. There is clear attitude that the child labourer needs protection and the ethical consumption message invites consumers to take action, to make a difference though their consumption practices. It is interesting to see the Chinese consumers’ responses towards a fairly strong message from the West. Although, participants occasionally showed sympathy towards child
labourers, they treat the child labour issues differently. Most participants openly accepted the use of child labour in China this acceptance can from a distinct moral position. Details can be seen in the following conversation:

Interviewer: if you know that this T-shirt is made by child labour, will you purchase it?

Participant: Yes. Child labour, so what? Children need money. Children need to feed their family... plus there are so many child workers in China ...so many...

Interviewer: what is your view on using child labour?

Participant: that is rather normal. Society’s need.

Interviewer: why do you think it is society’s need?

Participant: it’s very simple. Because children need food, they need this income. After all it is their only income source. The social welfare system is incomplete... it’s better they can work at least they can get fed than having no income and starving...

(Interviewee 4)

It can be observed from the participants’ language, child labour is something ‘normal’ and that ‘society needs’ in China; these comments suggest that child labour is not viewed as a particular problem due it being commonplace. This is not only reflected in the case of child labour, in fact, in many situations, something may not seem quite ‘right’, but because many people do (or not do) it, it becomes something normal. Such a message can be associated with the earlier section on environmental concern; as one participant expressed it, because nobody does anything to protect the environment, therefore we all just sit and wait, and hopefully the government will eventually do something. This view is highly consistent with the Chinese consumers’ ‘Lao baixing’ mind-set - there is a lack of impetus to ‘make a difference’ within consumers who have the strong sense of ‘obedience’ to those who have ‘greater power’ embedded within them.
The issues participants raised are not new arguments. Such issues resonate with the moral debates between deontology and consequentialism in relation to child labour (detailed discussions can be found in the literature review chapter). A participant raised the practical question of the outcome of a ‘boycott’ of child labour made products; this perspective mirrors the consequentialist arguments that the fate of children is worsened by the deontologist’s action – in essence an important source of family income might be reduced (Meiklejohn, 1998). The participant did not tangle with either of the philosophical debates, his logic was fairly simple; his point represented an important practical problem: working means being fed; not working means starving. That is where the participant brought in the concept of ‘social welfare system’.

A social welfare system is a set of government and/or NGO programmes that “offers assistance to needy individuals and families” (Investopedia, 2016). For example, it provides assistance through different programmes such as health care, unemployment compensation, housing and child care assistance. Although the notion of social welfare system is recognized worldwide, the types and amount of welfare available to individuals and families vary depending on the country, state or region. Compared with the UK for example, China’s social welfare system is very different and less comprehensive. As the participant suggested the social welfare system is incomplete in China. ‘Incomplete’ is loose term; it means not having all the necessary or appropriate parts, or not being full or finished.

To illustrate the notion of ‘incomplete’, a brief comparison of one programme – health care – may suffice. The NHS health care programme in the UK, which is a state-funded healthcare system, provides services that are free at the point of use; it ensures that individuals can receive medical treatment for free. In China, there is no such equivalent health care programme, free at the point of use. The cost of health care needs to be paid either by individual or the individual’s insurances/pension, if they have either. Although the Chinese social welfare system has been reformed and changed, and there are seemingly amazing statistics in terms of its improvement, the rules and regulations for receiving social welfare assistance are still fairly inflexible and
imbalanced depending on the region - for instance, rural or urban. According to The Guardian’s report (2013): the rural dwellers receive around 70 yuan a month; urban residents receive between 400 to 500 yuan; and civil servants receive two to three times that. One participant vouchsafed that there are strict rules when using the government medical pension, they can only access certain medicines; if they want to choose an alternative, they need to pay for it themselves. Another example is a reported story about Ren Yong, who was born in rural China and had no insurance in the city; when he worked in the urban city, should he fall ill there he had to return home (Guardian, 2013).

Participants also mentioned ‘there are so many child workers in China.’ Indeed, this mirrors the current ‘child labour’ situation as there are at least over 10 million children employed in rural enterprises in China (China Labour Bulletin, 2003). From the Western perspective, such a situation can be viewed as a severe problem that should be resolved. Interestingly, Chinese consumers do not necessarily share the same view. The participants’ responses demonstrate a neutral attitude, being able to accept the ‘use of child labour’ as part of fulfilling the needs of society. This ‘societal need’ suggests that the child labour issues cannot be viewed from a limited perspective within a specific area such as ethical consumer behaviour alone. Participants associate this issue with wider social concerns such as the social welfare system. From here, we can observe that to these Chinese consumers, it was impossible for them to face with this topic on its own without acknowledging the social environment they live in. As one participant said:

‘Child labour. This requires law to regulate, to increase expenditure on children’s welfare, education etc. What is the function of a country? Government?’ (Participant 1, G1)

The above comment from a participant directly points to the ‘country and government’; he did not associate the child labour issue with an individual consumer level of action but rather placed the responsibility at the feet of the government. This reflects that ‘child labour’ cannot be the responsibility of
the individual consumer alone. As the China Labour Bulletin (2003) suggests, it is a problem that requires the government to act and ensure legal enforcement, enterprise mentoring, access to official statistics and data transparency. From participants’ responses, we can learn that child labour issues are complicated subjects that need to be understood and located within the specific context being studied. Below is a personal story shared by one participant, in this story context ‘child labour’ was a positive experience.

Talking about child labour, actually, I was one (she chuckled). I remembered I helped my mother’s corner shop when I was kid, I always loved being there, I preferred my time in the store than in school. Especially, when I entered my middle school. My classmates, the boys, often joking about my size as I started putting on weight from that age. I felt it was a shame to go to school, being laughed and tricked by other students. I’d rather work for the family.

At that time, my family’s corner shop was further developed, my dad rented the land near our shop, he started to develop a fishing business next to the nearby mountain foot and build restaurant and guest rooms. So I decided to quit my school and help my family business. I loved working for the family kitchen, no body laughed about the size, and people always told me how much they enjoy my food. I found joy and value from working there. Frankly, I don’t see the problem working from a young age, some people call it child labour, I think it was also good life experience. Some people may go to high school, college and University, they have their wonderful life; but I have mine, which was not bad at all. If I wasn’t allowed to work as a ‘child labourer’; I really didn’t know what should I do… (Interviewee, 14)

The participant openly shared a personal life story with me, helped me to rethink the concept of ‘child labour’. When I was doing my literature review previously, child labour was something dark and negative. The participant story above added a different connotation to the notion of child labour. In the story context, working from a young age relieved her shame at school and
brought the participant joy. The most important thing was the participant decided to work, so she was not forced or deprived. If we track back to the concept of child labour in the Western literature, it refers to the employment of children in any work that *deprives* children of their childhood, interferes with their ability to attend regular school (International Labour Organization, 2012). The participant story offered a different argument: if the child willingly gives up attending regular school and chooses to be employed, will that still be considered child labour? And at what point should it be the child’s choice (it ever) – and is the deprivation of choice as inherently troubling as the notion of child labour itself?

The above story reminded me of a similar yet different story in the UK context. Like many Chinese takeaways in the UK, a Cantonese couple owns this Chinese takeaway in the story and they have one daughter. The first time I met her in the takeaway a couple years ago, she was shorter than the counter; so she had to stand on a chair to be able to pass the food to the customers. She is smart and speaks perfect English. Every day, after school, she spends time in the takeaway with her parents, doing her homework. If the phone rings, she picks up the phone and takes the order. Apparently, such a life pattern upsets the local residents, who seem very concerned with child labour issues, more than once, the police have received reports from the local residents and have come to inspect the premises. But she told me, she likes spending time with her parents, wherever her parents are, where her family is. So the takeaway is not just a business to her, it is her ‘family place’. From her perspective and that of the participant in the story above, they did not see themselves as child labourers; however, others, such the local residents, can perceive this differently. From stories like these, we can learn what is ‘ethical’ can be very different to different people in different situations, or from different cultural perspectives.

4.3.3.2 ‘Bad working conditions’ are better than ‘no jobs’

In line with ‘child labour’ issues, the topic of ‘working conditions’ was also explored during the communications with the participants. However, during the discussion process, the topic shifted as the word ‘job’ was frequently used by participants, and the concern for ‘working conditions’ turned out to
be often overtaken by ‘employment’. The description from participants demonstrated ‘employment problems’ in the society in which they live. The following discussion is extracted from focus group 4, and provides more details of the conversation.

Participant 4: In China, there are so many people, if one doesn’t take the job, plenty of others will.

Participant 1: Nowadays, exploitation is different compared with the old days. Both of the two parties are willing to do so. It is the workers freewill to work there. So it’s reasonable.

Participant 4: Nowadays, many workers still work in powder foundry, even wearing a mask, it is still very harmful for their health. Because of the higher wages, some people still want the job; although they clearly know that it will sacrifice their health.

Participant 1: If we all boycott, workers will lose their jobs. If one does not work here, one has to find somewhere else to work, somewhere may be even worse.

When discussing the working condition topic, some participants brought up the ‘employment problem’, another practical question, where they emphasized the difficulties of finding a job in China – which demonstrates another social problem is China. Participants pointed out that having to endure ‘bad working conditions is better than no job’ as many workers are willing to work for companies even when the working conditions are bad, because if they do not take the job, there are plenty of other workers waiting and willing to do so. Such descriptions points to the wider environment where the participants live, where there are more severe problems that need to be tackled (first).

Compared with the Western literature, where ethical concerns for working conditions have gained increased attention, consumers are more aware about such issues and enterprises also present their considerations around
the issues by addressing working conditions issues to achieve a sense of fairness and social justice. However, Chinese consumers’ first response to ‘working conditions’ were overtaken by another more serious concern – that of employment and job seeking. This shows the wider environment where participants live has a significant impact on their understanding of the ethical issues in their everyday lives, as well as their ethical concerns in consumption activity. To those Chinese consumers, ‘bad working conditions’ seem not that bad, as it is better than having ‘no job’.

Looking at Chinese consumers’ responses towards the working conditions issues, there are many similarities to their responses towards child labour. They both point to the practical problems – the social problem of unemployment, the commonality of the problem, and the close relationship of the problem within the social context. From participants’ comments, we do not gather the sense of their being against ‘bad working conditions’ and ‘child labour’ practice per se. Their responses reminded us that ‘child labour’ and ‘working conditions’ cannot be viewed as issues isolated from the consumers’ living environment. It is important to understand these issues within the social context. In addition, it can be sensed that Western moral position where those issues were developed does not seem to fit well with Chinese consumers' moral sources.

4.3.3.3 ‘Working conditions’ have no relationship to me
The Chinese consumers’ responses offered a different perspective towards the ethical issues in the Western literature, and this is reflected in the title above. This section’s title seems extreme – it is a fairly strong and ‘cold’ statement. Much of the discussions above highlight the external environment’s impact on Chinese consumers, such as the socio-political aspects of the Chinese society. The discourse around ‘working conditions’ also raised a view framed first from concern for self and the notion of relationship to others – and concerns of if this relationship is a direct one or mediated through other organizations, structures and power relationships. Details can be seen from the following extracts from focus group 4:
Participant 1: There is big gap between rich and poor in China. If I am rich, I would like to consider workers working conditions; but my own situation is not very optimistic, so I do not have spare energy to do anything for them. Most of us are still at the stage of surviving (in Chinese: ‘独善其身’).

Participant 1: One has no money, firstly think of himself (G4)

Participant 1 directly expressed that working conditions were something beyond his considerations due to his ‘life status’ (i.e. his concerns for self), as he was a university student. Therefore, he did not have income and relied on his parents’ support. He was struggling to find a balance between studying and living and he did not have the ability (or will) to consider ‘worker welfare’. He suggested that he was struggling with his own ‘welfare’, and so he tried his best to use the limited money he had. As for consumption, he could not think beyond the functional level of the product and the benefit he derived from it.

My consumption level is not that high yet, so what I can consider is limited, as in the ancient Chinese saying: In obscurity, scholars would maintain their own integrity; in time of success, they make perfect the whole empire (in Chinese: ‘穷则独善其身，达则兼济天下’)...

(Participant 1, G4)

Such a point of view was shared by many participants: that ethical concerns such as ‘working conditions’ are something distant and beyond their ability to engage with at present. Many suggested that such an engagement could (should) be put-off until a consumer’s spending power reached a particular level, or that their consumption reached a particular threshold. What was less clear is when such thresholds might be reached, and if this is a continually moving target – at what point would a consumer step into this ‘mythical’ domain where their funds and consumption would necessitate their consideration of issues such as workers’ conditions. This unresolved point may suggest that consumers use this ‘beyond my current means’ as a way of further distancing themselves and potentially constructing the notion that
those past the threshold should take responsibility – until that point is reached, the individual does not need to respond.

Labour or not labour, has no ‘half-penny relationship’ with me… things like worker welfare, it is something that the foundry’s owner needs to consider … to be fair, no need to tell me … (Interviewee 10)

It is the factory’s responsibility to look after their worker; it has no relationship to me. (Interviewee 2)

The above comments are participants’ first responses to ‘working conditions’, those comments came straight from the participants without much hesitation. It seems to participants that worker welfare is very ‘distant’ issue; participants found it is hard to find a ‘relationship’ between the product they purchase and consume and the worker who produced it. Participants did not understand how ‘working conditions’ may be related to them as consumers. In their minds, it is something that is the factory’s responsibility. In order to see participants’ further responses to worker welfare, I proposed a scenario. The following conversation shows participants specific response to such topic.

Interviewer: the scenario is now if you want to buy a coat, this coat is more expensive than the others, as this company looks after their staff and their staff are well paid. Do you feel this coat would appeal to you?

Participant: no way. Not convincing at all. This is not my business! (This has nothing to do with me! /this has no relationship with me at all!) This is their organization’s duty; they should consider their workers’ welfare. They cannot ask consumers to consider this for them. Too many things to consider in my own life, I cannot consider that. ‘Fittest survive’, if you as a business cannot survive, then go bankrupt…plenty of others can survive. They (business) cannot transfer their responsibility to consumers. They have to work it out themselves… (Interviewee 2)

From this participant’s answers and that of others, it can be seen that worker welfare is something very distant to them, naturally beyond their
consideration. The term used by participants was ‘no relationship’; ‘no half-penny relationship’. It reflects the perceived distance between the ethical issue and Chinese consumers. In addition, it implies that there is some underlying ‘force’ that shapes their way of rationalizing morality in the case of ‘working conditions’ – as in their mind, it does not seem natural for them to consider the welfare of workers who they do not even know. They tend to apportion responsibility for the workforce to employers.

This ‘responsibility’ (or concern) does not reside in the Chinese consumers’ purview – it is not that they have no control per se but rather that they do not deem it to be an issue to which they need to respond – their positionality in the supply chain means that others in the hierarchy of the channel bear this responsibility. Consumers are largely both shielded from it and absolved of its consideration. Such a distant perception of the relationship constitutes a sharp contrast to the Western literature; the notion of consumers caring for workers’ welfare and the moral position of protection of individuals do not seem appealing to the Chinese consumers.

4.3.3.4 Implications: the influences of social context in understanding of ‘human rights’

During the discourses around ‘human rights’, there are some other social problem highlighted by the Chinese consumers, the unemployment problem in China was predominant. And the concerns for ‘employment’ overtake the concerns for ‘human rights’. In such a situation, ‘bad working conditions’ and ‘child labour’ do not seem ‘too bad’ in the eyes of the Chinese consumers as they fit the society’s needs. Compared with the Western literature, it is natural to raise the questions why are perceptions of the same issues so different. Chinese consumers’ responses offer the explanation to such a question.

From the Chinese consumers’ responses, we can see that the overall responses toward ‘human rights’ were not overly positive in relation to ‘affirmative action’ by consumers and there is a lack of a common ground for such ethical concerns in this study context. This is firstly reflected in that the participants did not have enough information about certain ethical issues.
Secondly, participants perceived ‘human rights’ as a very ‘distant’ issue from them and they found it is hard to find a relationship between themselves and such ethical concerns. Thirdly, the discussion around ‘child labour’ and ‘worker welfare’ shifted the focus from consumers’ responsibility to the wider social context – it suggests that ‘human rights’ issues cannot be understood as being isolated from the wider social environment the consumers live in.

In the case of ‘child labour’ in China, as Bajpai (2014) describes: ‘China doesn’t follow (not strictly at least) laws related to child labour or minimum wages, which are more widely observed in the West’. As such, solely emphasizing Chinese consumers’ responsibility will not be sufficient to address the issues around child labour and worker welfare. This position probably serves to underscore the lack of individual consumer activity as a response to these concerns – the issue of this not only being the consumers’ problem, but one where their action alone is unlikely to make any real difference further supports the positions that many Chinese consumers have adopted.

4.5 Concluding remarks
From a phenomenological hermeneutics approach, this chapter provides an illustrative account of the ‘encounter’ between the Chinese consumers and the Western concept of ethical consumption. It reveals the ‘unresolved’ ethical discourse between the two and illuminates details based on the Chinese consumers’ lived experiences. In other words, this chapter reflects three levels of ‘incompatibility’ of the Western concept of ethical consumption within the everyday lives of the Chinese consumers. To illustrate such incompatibility, the Chinese consumers’ responses to specific ethical concerns and issues were developed as ‘scenes’; from those scenes, we can gather the incompatibly of the overall notion of Western ethical consumption, as well as its underlying moral base. In each scene, detailed conversations were provided and it can be observed that the Western concept of ‘ethical consumption’ did not resonate among Chinese consumers. These consumers found such a concept somewhat ‘alien’, ‘futuristic’ and ‘unrealistic’ in relation to their current consumption experiences.
Seemingly, Chinese consumers’ responses were not completely antipathetic to the Western concept of ethical consumption. Ethical concerns allied to the environment were understood. Whereas with those ethical concerns that concerned issues such as animal welfare and human rights, Chinese consumers did not consider these ‘issues’, as they were perceived as ‘distant’. However, the familiarity of the environmental concern does not lead to affirmative attitudes towards organic purchasing or other environmental-concern related purchasing behaviour. From this we can learn that information and knowledge alone do not necessarily foster consumers’ positive attitude or intention towards ethical consumption. It suggests that ethical consumption behaviour is a complicated subject that cannot be simply analysed within an idealised vacuum or a framework such as cognitive linear model or the theory of planned behaviour.

Compared with the West, where animal welfare, alongside human rights and environmental concerns, have gained a considerable amount of public (as well as academic) attention, Chinese consumers’ perspectives, to a large extent, reflect the importance of social context such as its cultural roots, physical consumption environment, the political and legislative environment, the spread of the information and the role of the mass media. It highlighted that in order to gain an understanding of consumers and their consumption behaviour, it is impossible to neglect the context in which they live; and this it only from the appreciation of the context where the consumers live that a good account of the ‘unresolved’ ethical discourse may be found.

The Western concept of ethical consumption is not universal in relation to its specific concerns and moral foundations; future studies into ethical consumption should avoid directly transplanting Western concepts into a different context. It is ineffective to transplant such a Western concept into another context without first understanding if such a concept is well-understood and accepted by those living in there. In the light of this research outcome, this study also reflects that the interpretation of the ‘encounter’ between the Chinese consumers and the Western concept of ethical consumption is neither the universal nor the final interpretation. However, this study’s interpretation provides insights and understandings of the
concept of ethical consumption, which helps to lead to a more holistic view towards this subject.

This chapter’s findings address a lack in the current literature by adding a different perceptive on ethical consumption from Chinese consumers’ views. From those detailed descriptions, a sense of understanding can be achieved, not just that the Western concept of ethical consumption and its premises, does not fit well with Chinese consumers, but also it provides detailed account of the Chinese consumers’ perspective towards this Western concept. Furthermore, it helps us understand those consumers and the social context in which they live and their relationship to that consumption environment. From here, we can learn that how the meanings of ethical consumption are perceived is largely impacted by the context where it constructed.

The context in which the Chinese consumers’ responses can be viewed has several aspects. It can be associated with the physical consumption environment – the Chinese marketing system; the Chinese legislative and political aspects (some of them may not be consistent with Western legislation in regards to certain ethical concerns and practices); the Chinese social atmosphere which does not address ethical concerns as the West does. Besides the external contextual elements, Chinese consumers’ perceptions towards those Western ethical issues, and how they went about their positionalities in the ethical discourse, point to deeper reasons that formed their perspectives and their way of rationalizing the ‘ethical’ – that of the traditional Confucian moral philosophies. As a result, the Chinese consumers’ responses towards the Western concept of ethical consumption can be boiled down to one line: the Western rights-based moral position does not accord with the Chinese consumers’ Confucian moral position based on virtues.

At the end of this chapter, Chinese consumers ‘encounter’ with the Western concept of ethical consumption has been revealed: the detailed descriptions of the event, as well as the mood that event convey. Tracing back to beginning of this chapter, I referred this chapter as a ‘play’ or a ‘drama’ to
indicate that it has excitement, emotion and unexpected circumstances. And this has been born out as this chapter’s ‘play’ demonstrates a different perspective to the Western. However, at the conclusion of this chapter there is a lack of ‘resolution’ – whilst the Western concerns do not resonate – what is the ‘ethical position’ of these Chinese consumers and what ethical issues do they contend with in their everyday consumption, and to what extent does the Confucian moral vision work in their construction of meanings of ethical consumption – the next chapter seeks to explore these concerns and how the meanings of ethical consumption are constructed among the Chinese consumers.
Chapter 5. What does ethical consumption mean to the Chinese consumers?

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is a natural extension of the previous findings. The previous chapter discussed the Chinese consumers’ responses towards the Western notion of ‘ethical consumption’ – and concluded that this Western concept does not resonate well among Chinese consumers. The ‘lack of fit’ of the Western concept of ethical consumption does not suggest there is no understanding of the ‘ethics’ in Chinese consumers’ consumption life. Indeed, Chinese consumers have their own interpretations of the concept of ethical consumption, which represents their understanding based on their lived life experience in a Chinese context.

The influences of the Chinese environment, such as information channels, legislative aspects and social conditions, were highlighted in chapter 4; in addition, the issues raised in the previous chapter also suggest that there are deeply rooted reasons that rest on Chinese cultural values, which seem play an important part in shaping the Chinese consumers’ understandings of the concept of ethical consumption. The aim of this chapter is to discover and display what these specific cultural values are and how the meanings of ethical consumption are perceived by those Chinese consumers. As such, it is important to note that the concept of ‘ethical consumption’ is discussed in this chapter purely from a Chinese consumers’ perspective; the discussion addresses Chinese consumers’ interpretations of the meanings and the related concerns of ethical consumption.

By the end of the chapter, a sense of Chinese ethical consumption should be revealed. By exploring the meaning of Chinese ethical consumption, it also provides insights into the similarities and the differences between Chinese and Western perspectives (the latter as detailed in the extant literature). This chapter reveals the specific Confucian cultural values that are closely associated with Chinese consumers’ understandings of ethical consumption and how the meanings of ethical consumption are constructed during Chinese consumers’ everyday consumption experiences. Borrowing the
analogy of the theatrical concept of ‘drama’, the previous chapter set the scene of the ‘play’; now it is this within this chapter where the real show starts. From here, Chinese consumers’ voices can be heard.

5.2 Trustworthiness - Chinese consumers’ struggles
The literature review chapter established a narrative; it tells the story of the Western ideas of ethical consumption. From that story, we learn that the main characters are the consumers, and Western ideas of ethical consumption suggest that consumers are empowered and have the abilities and responsibilities to make changes from within their consumption behaviour. Such an outlook demonstrates the trust that the Western consumers have in the notion of ethical consumption. Specifically, Western consumers trust that ‘free-range’ eggs mean better treatment of chickens, ‘no animal testing’ means less animal suffering, ‘organic’ means being friendly to the environment, ‘fair-trade’ means that the workers from third-world countries are guaranteed a minimum wage - all these are the promises of ethical consumption in the West, but more than that, they are realized in, and through, consumption.

However, from the previous chapter, we already see that there is lack of confidence among the Chinese consumers towards companies’ claims; and a lack of trust towards companies’ credibility. This can be seen from section 4.3.2.1, and Chinese consumers’ responses towards ‘organic’. High levels of scepticism and cynicism were reflected in Chinese consumers’ discourse on organic produce. The previous chapter also reveals trust issues, yet there was lack of depth and detail when exploring this topic among the Chinese consumers’ daily consumption; and what this means to them and how it impacts their understandings of the notion of ethical consumption. The following stories explore this theme further and provide a detailed account of the Chinese consumers’ struggle with ‘trustworthiness’.

5.2.1 Hell, how can they sell poisoned infant formula?
‘Infant formula’ is a manufactured food designed and marketed to feed babies under 12 months of age. According to the report from World Health Organization (WHO), infant formula prepared in accordance with applicable
food code standards is a safe complementary food and a suitable breast milk substitute (World Health Organization, 2001). In the context of this story, it was very unfortunate that some Chinese infant formula does not match the WHO description. The following extract reveals not only an incident related to trust but also a tragic story about Chinese babies who were hurt from positioned infant formula. This extract was from interview 8, during the discussion of the meanings of ethical consumption in China.

People often discuss this (ethical issues in consumption), perhaps borrowing one phrase: “long-term, deep-rooted bad habits of a nation” (in Chinese: 劣根性, lie-gen-xing). This relates to ethical issues, where they do not have an ethical boundary. Say, poisoned milk powder, how can they make this, poisoned infant formula for babies? For they only care about profit. They did not think about the outcome that is harmful for lots of baby’s lives. I think there is the ethical problem in consumption… look around us, no matter big or small retailers, they only see the profit. They only care about their own benefits, money, money! They don’t care about their impact on others. This is perhaps because they are short of money…when they aren’t short of money, maybe the ethical standard will be improved. Who knows…

(Interviewee 8)

In the above short extract, issues around the ‘infant’ was given special attention, as one of the most striking ethical consumption issue for Chinese consumers in recent times. The rationale for the prioritization of the ‘infant’ and its use in the demonstration of a moral measurement; can be traced back to Confucian wisdom. As Mencius said “All people have a heart which cannot stand to see the suffering of others. Even nowadays, if an infant were about to fall into a well, anyone would be upset and concerned. This concern would not be due to the fact that the person wanted to gain favour with the baby’s parents, or because s/he wanted to improve his/her reputation among the community or among his/her circle of friends. Nor would it be because he/she was afraid of the criticism that might result from a show of non-concern” (Gong Sun Chou, 2A:6). From this point of view, Mencius taught: if
one did lack concern for the infant, one would not be human. The images of infant and concerns for infant have long been used in the illustration of a moral measurement in Confucian teaching. Given this cultural background it helps better to explain that significance of ‘infant formula’ and its negative impacts to Chinese consumers.

The personal pronoun ‘they’ also stands out from the extract above, it was used nine times. ‘They’ seem crucial to the notion of ethical consumption from the participant’s voice. Therefore, it is import to clarify who ‘they’ are and what was the poisoned infant formula about? The poisoned infant formula referred to the ‘2008 Chinese milk scandal’ (section 2.6.2 offered more details); it was a very unfortunate incident – a previously well respected Chinese dairy company, ‘San-lu’, produced melamine-contaminated infant formula and sold these products in the Chinese market. As a consequence, it caused six baby’s deaths and 300,000 babies were affected (Foster, 2011).
It became evident, that in using ‘they’ - the participant accused not only the company, San-lu, but also many other companies and retailers. As another also participant expressed:

…drank milk, something wrong, so the story about the milk came out. A few days later, the news changed, it became red centre duck eggs, somebody got hurt from eating it, so it was reported. Then KFC, Sudan I* was also reported, so we do not feel it is safe to eat KFC anymore… you see, only when something went wrong or someone got hurt was it reported and it became a big deal; how about before that? Isn’t it a problem before the bad things happened? (Interviewee 13)

*Sudan I: (Chinese: 苏丹红 1 号, pinyin: su dan hong yi hao) a red dye used to colour oils, it is banned from food in some countries because of fears it can cause cancer. Unfortunately, The KFC fast food in China has reported sales of two dishes containing Sudan I (bbc.co.uk)

The poisoned infant formula incident occurred in 2008. However, its impacts did not stop there; as the above participant described - countless new problems occurred that constantly remind the Chinese of that pain. By the time the fieldwork for this study was conducted, five to six years had passed, yet the Chinese consumers firmly held on to that painful memory as if it
happened yesterday. The poisoned infant formula then has an extended meaning, a symbolic meaning to the Chinese consumers. It is almost like an invisible explosive device hidden in consumers’ daily consumption life – it could explode anytime or anywhere if they are not careful. From here, it seems clear why the Chinese consumers find it extremely difficult to accept a rights-based view of Western ethical consumption. It seems insensible to overtly address animal welfare, or the environment, or workers’ welfare to the Chinese consumers, without firstly making sure of their own welfare.

From the participant voices, we can also hear the call for responsible companies to protect the vulnerable. Such vulnerability can be viewed as symbolizing the Chinese consumer – the vulnerable Chinese consumers who need companies to be responsibility and to produce safe products. As, when the companies fail to do so, consumers’ confidence in companies is ruined and the trust between consumers and the companies is broken. The story of the infant formula sends out a strong message, a call for the re-establishment of trust. As the literature review explored, trust, known as cheng-xin in Chinese, is regarded as the one of the most fundamental virtues in Confucian moral teachings. Thousands of years has gone by; yet this gem of the Chinese virtue remains as valuable and useful, especially in the current problematic Chinese market.

5.2.2 The locker drama

From the above stories, we can see that there is ‘trust crisis’ in the Chinese market – presented by the Chinese consumers’ lack of confidence in companies’ credibility. This ‘trust crisis’ also implies a broken relationship – between the Chinese consumers and the companies. In the above stories Chinese consumers; complaints towards the companies are foregrounded; the image is created that the Chinese consumers distrust companies. However, it does not offer comment on the converse relationship; do the Chinese consumers feel trusted by the companies? The following stories offer some clarification of this question, they are about the ‘locker’. For most of the Western consumers, the concept of supermarket locker might not be very familiar, as it is not commonly used in the Western context (excluding Spain), but it is still commonly found in China.
Nowadays, some supermarkets still strictly require customers to leave their bags and personal belongings in the locker before entering the supermarket shopping area…we have to obey their rule… to be honest; is it necessary? What is the purpose for locking our bags? Do they worry that we may have bad behaviour…? (Interviewee 6)

The participant brought up the locker practice during the conversation of ethical consumption in China – it seems the locker is closely associated with his understanding of ethical consumption. He questioned the necessity of such practice. From the participant’s perspective, it acts as a ‘sign’ that the supermarket does not trust its customers. As already discussed above, Chinese consumers find it extremely difficult to trust business organizations; in turn, the participant’s comments suggest that businesses do not seem to trust their customers either. Trust, as highlighted in the previous section, is naturally attributable to relationships between social actors (Gambetta, 2000), in the case of consumption, consumers and business.

Requirements such as locking up consumers’ personal bags before entering the shopping area, seem have a negative impact on consumers’ perceived trust relationship towards supermarkets. There is abundant information in the Chinese media reporting how this ‘compulsory regulation’ has caused direct conflicts between consumers and the supermarkets (Jinghua Daily, 2015). The conversation between the ‘consumer’s right’ to take in personal belongs and ‘compulsory supermarket locker regulation’ has been discussed over the years. However, the current situation is a mixed picture in the Chinese market; at the moment, some supermarkets have cancelled such requirements, but others still maintain this practice. Below is another story related to the supermarket ‘locker’, but this time it is about the absence of lockers.

…I bought a magazine from outside and carried this magazine into this supermarket (an international brand). When I checked out, the cashier also scanned my magazine, which I left on the bottom of the shopping basket. I tried to explain I bought it from outside, but the cashier somehow managed to scan it, and funny enough the price
came up, so I was required to pay for it... I thought it was impossible... So the disagreement with the cashier caught the attention of the security guards and the manager. They went to check the video recording and realised that I was holding this magazine when I entered the supermarket. Then they allowed me to leave, but I felt bad... It was such an embarrassment... so many people were watching... I would have put my magazine in the locker if they have lockers for customers to use... (Interviewee 7)

The story from interviewee 7, shows that the issue of trust occurs even without lockers in the supermarket. It seems the 'supermarket locker' has become a paradox; the presence/absence of the locker is a 'consumer call' for trust from the merchant. Both participants' experiences reflect that they did not feel trusted by the supermarkets. From the locker stories, it can be seen that consumers were either forced to store personal belongings or required to pay for something which already belonged to them. This echoes the 'infant formula' story, it shows the relative vulnerability of Chinese consumers as they perceive themselves, as someone who deserves protection and respect in their consumption process.

As for the lockers, it seems the superficial cause of 'distrust' in both participants’ story. Deep down, it was not the lockers that caused the distrust; but something more fundamental. The locker symbolizes an invisible cell that separates the trusting relationship between consumers and the merchant – a broken relationship; and such broken relationships seems to also points to even wider relationships. There is a need to restore such broken relationship, to rebuild the trust between the two parties – consumers and merchant. Furthermore, a strong call can be heard, for mutual respect and trust in consumption practices, as well as in the Chinese society as a whole.

5.2.3 Uncle’s ‘free-range’ eggs

The literature review reveals that the concept of ‘free-range’ eggs has not officially been adopted in China. However, from the participants’ responses, the idea of ‘free-range’ does not seem alien to them. It turned out that the Chinese consumers use various interesting names when referring to free-
range eggs, such as: earth eggs (土鸡蛋; 柴鸡蛋), orchard free-range (果园散养鸡蛋), and biological eggs (生态鸡蛋); there are even colloquial names for this type of chicken such as ‘fitness chicken’ (健身鸡), and ‘jogging chicken’ (跑步鸡). For consistency, the term ‘free-range’ is adopted in the following stories. The various names used by participants confirm that there is a lack of national standards for ‘free-range’ husbandry methods in China. The loose standards in ‘free-range’ produce also open a ‘grey-area’ for ‘unethical’ practice. The conversations below offer more details about such practice.

You think that you purchased free-range eggs, it’s just normal eggs pretending…we cannot really purchase free-range eggs because there aren’t any… (Interviewee 5)

I then inquired how he came to such a conclusion, this participant frankly admitted that:

I learned this from life, from living here long enough… (Interviewee 5)

He continued:

One of my uncles used to feed chickens and sell eggs, what he called ‘free-range’ eggs were all normal ones, he just put them into a box with free-range images and writing… nobody sells free-range these days. You can find out on the internet…plus the news reported so many things like this… (Interviewee 5)

I followed up with a question: how about the free-range from the big supermarket certificated free-range, will you trust that?

No, sorry to disappoint you. Free-range just like the ‘organic’ food, ‘green pork’ - the same theory, you see there is lack of regulation on that, even if there is some, nobody follows it. Who would be so stupid to do the real deal and give up the chance to make more money? (Interviewee 5)
From the above story, the lack of trust was again highlighted. It can be seen that the participant did not trust the name of free-range from his personal life experiences, as he witnessed how his uncle’s egg business worked. In addition to a lack of regulation in the Chinese market, the ‘fake’ free-range eggs had become a common phenomenon, which can be seen from the news reports on the internet and in public domain. As a consequence, the participant, to an extreme extent, rejected trusting any free-range claim. From this story, the impact of personal experiences and the consumption environment on consumers’ perceptions of trust can be seen. From what the interviewee said, ‘free-range’ eggs are almost like an ‘ideology’ that is beyond the Chinese consumers’ reality. Other participants also contributed to the discussion on free-range eggs.

...there is a BBQ place on the top of the local water reservoir (in Chang-ping district); they also have chicken barns. As a matter of fact, only a certain number of free-range eggs can be produced each day, that’s not enough for the supply (as this water reservoir area is a famous tourist spot). So they chose the smaller sized eggs among normal eggs, and put them into the barn to make them seem like free-range eggs. In fact, most tourists bought the so-called free-range eggs were actually conventional ones. (Interviewee 6)

The ‘secret information’ the interviewee provided is similar to the previous story from interviewee 5 uncle’s egg business. Conventional eggs are substituted for free-range eggs. This seems ‘normal’ practice to most of the participants; consumers seem quite ‘relaxed’ about such an approach. It sometimes is perceived as an acceptable practice, for example, as the participant expressed:

It is not something too bad, isn’t it? People just seek for a bit more profit. But we cannot say they are ‘fake’ eggs; at least, they are real eggs. People often joke about it as qian-gui-ze* eggs (Interviewee 6)

From comments like these, Chinese consumers seem very tolerant. Indeed, compared with many other food safety scandals, such as the poisoned infant formula, conventional eggs being substituted for free-range eggs, seem
relatively unimportant – and was not seen as being overtly unethical. This echoes a news report entitled ‘Curse Free-Range Eggs’ (Chinese title: 满城尽是柴鸡蛋), which revealed the egg industry’s ‘open secret’ in Beijing. A journalist, Zheng (2014) reported that about 170,000 tons of eggs are produced in Beijing per year, 90% of which are conventional eggs (about 150,000 tons), and fewer than 20,000 tons are -free-range. However, there are more ‘free-range’ than conventional eggs on sale in Beijing. Such conflicting numbers are very confusing. The journalist questioned, ‘where have the large number of conventional eggs gone’ and investigated. By the end of the report, the journalist revealed the story of ‘exchanging the identity of eggs’, conventional eggs were easily changed into free-range eggs by putting into a different box; and such practice was widely practised by small and big, independent and franchised supermarkets in Beijing.

In addition, Gong (2014) reported that there are over thirty kinds of free-range eggs claimed to be on sale in Beijing and it is difficult to distinguish between them. He also investigated the egg producer to see their farming standards. However, it was an extremely awkward situation because there is a no unified national standard, so each individual producer can claim that their eggs are ‘free-range’ and give them slightly different names such as: farmer’s earth eggs; countryside freedom eggs, bumpkin’s eggs for example (in Chinese: 农夫土鸡蛋，乡野柴鸡蛋，土老帽笨鸡蛋). The loose term of free-range points to the lack of regulation on ‘free-range’, that seems to create opportunity for ‘unethical’ business practice.

*The phrase ‘qian-gui-ze’ was used by the participant; it refers to an ‘implicit rule’, and the literal translation would be ‘going-underwater-regulation’. This phrase was created by a Chinese author Wu Si, who firstly used it in his article (the rationale for corrupt officials, 当贪官的理由) in 1997 and it was popularized with his book publication - Implicit rule: the real game in Chinese history (潜规则: 中国历史中的真游戏) in 2009. In the book, it means the invisible, unwritten rules that are commonly accepted and worked in real life, and that people had to ‘follow’. In the context of eggs, the participant borrowed this phrase to demonstrate that such practice is like an ‘open secret’ widely
practiced under the government regulations, as well as understood by the consumers.

It might be true that the negative news and reports contribute to the consumers’ damaging attitudes towards ‘free-range’. However, it points to ‘higher order issues’ in China. Before, I reached this point I was convinced that Chinese consumers are highly cynical from the answers they provided, as they have the tendency to remember negative incidents (Helm, 2004). After learning what consumers said and the background of their stories, I realized that it is both inappropriate and ineffective to hold onto consumer’s cynical attitudes in understanding consumers’ ethical consumption behaviour in China. For example, in the case of ‘free-range’ eggs, there is lack of law and legislation in relation to the methods of poultry farming. A businessman often takes advantage of this ‘law empty’ arena and gains more profit by mislabelling products.

5.2.4 Implications: sad times - who can we trust?
The above stories from participants mirror their struggles with ‘trustworthiness’ in their consumption life. Their struggles were not one-sided; but from multiple aspects. It became evident that the Chinese consumers have trust issues with business claims, such the ‘free-range’, ‘organic’ labels. The ‘lack of trust’ was not one in direction, while the Chinese consumers do not trust the companies; they do not feel trusted by the merchant. In addition, the sense of a lack of trust is not limited to within their consumption life; it seems that this lack of trust is also closely associated with their life experience and their living environment. This can be seen in the story below - one participant shared her mother’s worries.

My mother went to the morning market to buy some vegetables the other day. On her way back, she saw some cyclist fall over on the road; I cannot believe she instantly stopped her bike and helped that person… I feel so worried, what if it was a peng-ci*, what if the person blames my mother, saying it was her fault and asks for money from her? The situation is very worrying at the moment, haven’t you seen the TV reports, they tell all kinds of different yet similar stories - how a
good person helped someone; in turn, that good person was the victim of fraud… In the past, isn’t that something that we are supposed to do; to help others out without a second thought? But nowadays, we are afraid of helping others… (Interview, 14)

*In the above story, there is a phrase ‘peng-ci’ (碰瓷), which is exclusively used in Beijing dialect. It refers to some malicious and illegal behaviour intended for fraudulent purposes. For example, one may deliberately create a motor vehicle accident and ask for compensation, which was also the participant’s worry. The phrase peng-ci literally means “touching porcelain”, it can be traced back to antique industry jargon. Some business owners deliberately placed some porcelain decorations near the aisle; that way it greatly increased the opportunities for the decorations to be smashed by passing customers. The business owners then claimed compensation.

The participant’s concern is also a worry within Chinese society. It reflects the perceived moral decay in China; the moral vacuum that the participant sees is given as proof. The participant suggested that this situation is “…the sadness of our time”. This, on the one hand, suggests the relevance of ethical consumption to consumers’ wider life; on the other hand, points to a shift in Chinese society – the participant’s story represents a typical view that things were safer, better and more ethical in the past. ‘That past’ the Chinese consumers hold on - it is not just idealized nostalgia; from the contemporary consumption stories of the participants we learn that the moral decay has become evident to them in contemporary China. It has been recognized by the consumers from their daily consumption experiences as well as their wider life experiences. The virtue cheng-xin, trustworthiness, is then particularly relevant and is needed to address the moral issues that China is facing.

5.3 Family – central concerns among the Chinese consumers

Referring back to the Western literature, ethical consumption often emphasizes the welfare of worker, child, animal and the environment. Such emphasis demonstrates an overview, as if the viewer is an outsider and is looking beyond oneself, or from above, to the wider context. As previous
chapters explained, such an outward view does not resonate with the Chinese consumers. The Chinese consumers have their own way of viewing the concept of ethical consumption that belongs to them, it is much more like an insider’s view, one where the consumer is ‘in-the-view’. The Chinese consumers have shifted the outward concerns to an inward concern, and in particular, they convey a strong sense of concern for their own, and their families, welfare.

5.2.1 A Chinese mother’s consumption story
In our ordinary life, we constantly listen to others stories, create new stories and also share our stories with others. But it seems difficult for us to remember all the sorties we have heard or experienced, human memories can be very selective and we tend to remember things that are special to us, such as our loved ones’ birthdays and anniversaries. Here is an example, it shows how a participant is being selective when she shares her stories. During the interactions with the participant, I learnt that she had already encountered problems more than once. But when I invited her to share some of the problems, she gave one particular experience – that of the bad milk purchase. Below is that particular experience as she remembered and shared it with me.

The first time, when I was pregnant, I bought a box of Mengniu milk (Mengniu Dairy, 蒙牛, one of the leading dairy brands in China, State-owned). There were a few bags which had problems, water and fat separation in the milk. So I contacted the supermarket, and they suggested I contact the manufacturer directly. So I did. The manufacturer suggested I contact the person who is responsible for this area, so I contacted this person, and finally he came and admitted the problem. According to their regulations, one bag of bad milk should be exchanged for two/three bags of good milk. But the second time I had the same problem again, I did not contact anyone… it’s too much hassle. So I gave up using this brand entirely… (Interviewee 8)

Initially, I thought this story directly points to the problematic consumption environment in China, and linked this story to the notorious food safety
problems. Furthermore, I developed this into the lack of trust (cheng-xin) in the Chinese market. Later on, I realised that I should not just stop here as this story indicates something beyond the external environment. The participant could have told me any other bad shopping experience, but she picked this story to share and the story started with ‘… when I was pregnant…’. This short line actually says quite a lot which I did not pick up at the time till later on she continued to tell her consumption stories…

Participant: Eggs are essentials in our home. My son has an egg every day.

Interviewer: That’s very nice. Eggs are a good nutrition source. Would you mind telling me about your major concerns in purchasing eggs?

Participant: Firstly, it needs to be fresh. Although some surveys suggest that there is not much difference between the free-range and caged eggs, I think the husbandry methods are different, the chicken’s food source and growing environments are also different. Because my son likes eggs, so I choose the eggs from the nearby farmers. There are lots of farmers’ eggs in the morning market. Eggs, I don’t like the big brands including the famous brands (as she had similar bad experiences with Mengniu milk). As I had enough bad shopping experiences with big companies, so I don’t chose big companies’ brands, I prefer eggs directly from the farmers without any brands. Even it is a bit expensive, it fresh and feels safe to eat. (Interviewee 8)

Suddenly, I noticed a pattern in this interview. Although all our conversations were centred on consumption activities and everyday purchasing, from the way the participant detailed the story, I cannot help to notice that she was not just a consumer, she was a mother. And this is significant as this explains why among the many consumption experiences, she shared the one when she was pregnant – that was when she was a mother-to-be. The participant only mentioned it by passing, which seems trivial and irrelevant at the time, however, the phenomenological hermeneutics approach pays attention to such details: when the narrative went on, I learnt that many of her
consumption concerns were closely associate with her son - her one and only son.

At this point, it is perhaps worth mentioning the ‘one-child policy’ in China from 1978/1980 to 2015 (China Economics Weekly, 2009), as this participant’s situation was an example under this policy. As the extracts above demonstrated, during the conversation on eggs purchasing, the participant’s concerns were not centred on animal welfare concerns as associated often with ‘free-range’ or ‘organic’; nor for the environment; her central concern was derived from her love for her son; as a loving mother – she aimed to provide the freshest and most notorious eggs for her son. That was her central ethical concern, simply that. It became evident that the central concern, as well ethical consideration, of this participant – as a mother - was to protect her son and offer the best possible options that she could. However, it was unclear if it was the ‘side-effect’ of the ‘one-child policy’: her being an over-protective mother. The following sections provide more clarity.

5.2.2 The Chinese Dad who buys New Zealand kiwis
This fruit has a unique appearance and a very interesting history - in terms of its origin and changing name. Kiwis are native to China and originally were called Yang Tao (in Chinese: 杨桃); it was brought to New Zealand form China by missionaries in the early 20th century with the first commercial planting occurring few decades later (Mateljan, 2016). They were renamed as Chinese Gooseberries in 1960. When Chinese Gooseberries were imported to the U.S. market, the name was changed by an American distributor to Kiwi, in honour of the native bird of New Zealand, the Kiwi, whose brown fuzzy coast resembled the skin of this unique fruit (Mateljan, 2016).

From the brief history of Kiwi above, we learn how this native Chinese fruit became international; and synonymous with New Zealand. Although the kiwi’s origin was China, the popular name in the Chinese market is qi-yi-guo (in Chinese: 奇异果) based on the pronunciation of kiwi, this name often
refers to imported kiwi from New Zealand. The domestic kiwi is often called mi-hou-tao (in Chinese: 猕猴桃).

The New Zealand kiwi commonly has a sticker attesting to its ‘origins’. Apart from the identifiable difference through the stickers, there are some differences between the two types of kiwi, such as slightly difference in taste and texture. However, the most distinctive features between the two types of kiwi are its retail price: the imported kiwi is sold individually, each one is on sale for 4 Yuan; while the domestic kiwi is sold by weight, half a kilo (about 6 or 7 medium fruit) sells for 4 Yuan. (My apologies for going on about kiwis, but it is relevant to the following story.)

Fruit, normally, we purchase it nearby from our neighbourhood, such as street sellers. But kiwis must be from Walmart, my son loves that type of kiwi - New Zealand kiwi. I don’t know the technical difference, but there is a difference between New Zealand kiwi and Chinese kiwi… somehow, the New Zealand kiwi is sweeter and tastes better. Although it is much more expensive than the normal kiwi, my son just loves it… so I only buy kiwi from Walmart… Other fruit, if I eat it, it doesn’t matter, imported or domestic, good quality or not so good quality. But if it is for my son or my mother, it needs to be good. I don’t mind spending a bit more on quality fruit for them. (Interviewee 7)

This kiwi story seems quite striking. Although the fruit was native to China this father would rather spend more money to purchase the imported product. The concept of supporting ‘local produce’ or reducing ‘food miles’ were completely absent from this participant. Similar to the mother in the previous section, for this participant, as a consumer and as a father, his central concern was to buy the kind of kiwi that his son likes. It seems that the mother in the previous section was not alone; this father’s purchasing echoes the Chinese mother’s concern. This kind of parental love was strongly presented by a number of the Chinese consumers, consumption was not only a simple act of purchasing something, quite often, it is associated with expressing love and care for their family members.
From the above stories, the Chinese parents seem very protective of their children; although, at this point, it is yet unclear that if the Chinese parents’ protective stance is influenced by the ‘one-child’ policy, or something more deeply rooted. From the stories above we can, at least, gather that ‘the mother’ and ‘the father’ who shared their experiences were not alone, such images of Chinese parents are fairly common in the Chinese context. Chinese parents have the habit of expressing their love and concerns through their consumption activities; and they are willingly to pay more when the issues concern their child rather than themselves.

In the above extract, the participant mentioned ‘street sellers’ and it did not seem significant in the main theme of the story. The participant did not give special emphasis to the ‘street sellers’ as it was just one of the most ordinary things in the Chinese consumers’ life. However, I feel that it needs to be further explanation about the ‘street seller’ phenomenon in China, which may not be commonly practised in most of the Western countries. The street sellers are also known as individual traders, they are found in morning markets, on the sides of streets, and around the neighbourhood. In China, small traders play an important role in the consumption system. However, there is a lack of accurate statistics on the number of small individual traders, as many existing small individual traders are often unregistered. It is a one of the simplest ways of doing business; for example, one person, one bike, something for sale, could be anywhere, anytime. I took some pictures of street sellers from the fieldwork, which can be seen in appendix 1, these hopefully offer a flavour of another aspect of Chinese consumers’ consumption stories.

5.2.3 The £200 infant formula
I thought a good place to start this story is by doing some simple currency exchange. 200 Pounds was exchanged to about 2000 Yuan (at the time of the fieldwork). At first sight, 200 Pounds is not a large amount of money that would lead to serious concerns. However, it worth considering what 200 Pounds means in a Chinese context. According to China Labour Bulletin, the average annual wage for urban workers in China was less than 60,000 Yuan in 2013 and 2014 (that was the time when the fieldwork was conducted), this
means the average monthly wage for urban workers is less than 5000 Yuan. This number represents urban workers’ income in China, in other areas such as the rural or the urban-rural-fringe area, workers’ income could be even less. 200 Pounds could be just under half a Chinese worker’s monthly wage; if they earn below the average it could mean almost a whole month’s wages.

This should help to set the scene for the following story. This story was from focus groups 3, which consisted of young parents, and involved a discussion around powered milk – infant formula. Parents were particularly anxious about domestic powdered milk quality; therefore, they purchased imported products instead. All the participants in this focus groups admitted that they purchased imported powdered milk, even though that means they had to pay more. Below are some of extracts from the discussion.

Lately, I just spent over 2000 RMB on importing milk powder for a single purchase. I don’t mind how much money I spend on MY child as long as I can purchase safe products! (Participant 2, G2)

(Meanwhile, another participant who was sitting next to her, they obviously knew each other well, teased her saying: “well, half month’s income gone”.)

As a mother, the participant expressed that she feels very protective of her child. She admitted that it was very expensive for her, but she was laughing while she was saying this, though with some bitterness in her tone. It was obvious that she was making considerable effort and financial sacrifice to purchase good quality powdered milk for her child. The Chinese consumers’ love and care for their family, in this case, their child, is a driving force in their consumption decision making. Underneath the strong theme of family love, I cannot stop questioning why the Chinese parents are so concerned with their child (perhaps, even a little bit over-protective) and where this strong sense of protection comes from?

5.2.4 Implications: that family love never fades
It is fair to say that all participants, to a great extent, expressed their concerns for their family during the interviews and focus groups discussions.
For instance, participants inevitably mentioned family members in relation to their consumption practice, titles such as ‘my mum’, ‘my dad’, ‘my child’, ‘my son’, ‘my daughter’, ‘my husband’ and ‘my wife’ were often used when participants told consumption experiences and stories. It demonstrates that for these individual consumers, the consumption activity is not just about personal choice or concerns, it relates to wider concerns for other family members. In particular, participants expressed concern for their children and for aging parents. From the Chinese consumers’ stories, it can be sensed that Chinese consumers’ strong family bond was not simply a reaction to government policy nor to the consumption environment; there is something much more strong and enduring underneath.

During one interview, when I asked the participant what was the most memorable things in his past consumption experience, surprisingly, he was able to recall something that happened more than half a century ago. It was a very different era, that was when the Peoples’ Republic of China, in its infancy at that time, did not have the one-child policy and the food safety problem had not occurred; the economy and political system were quite different from the contemporary situation. The story told by the participant reflected his life experience in the planned economy period in China, when each individual could only gain limited food and their purchase activities were strictly limited by ration stamps (in Chinese: 粮票; pin yin: liang piao,). The ration stamp was issued by the Chinese government to allow the holder to obtain food or other commodities that were in short supply during the planned economy period from 1955 to 1993 in China.

I remembered at that time, my brothers and sister, we were always hungry. I never knew how it felt like with a full warm tummy…. my mum even cooked the cob to feed us; nowadays even pigs won’t eat that. But we did. Potato, I hate potato, we used to have it every day, nothing else just potato. Pork was such a rare thing; we had it once a year, when we could only have a small amount before the Chinese New Year.
I remember it was a Chinese New Year’s Eve, our family were all gathered together. My grandma and my mum together made dumplings with that precious pork. When the dumplings were ready, we were all sitting around the table, chewing the dumplings slowly and enjoying this once a year treat…my second brother finished his dinner before anyone else and then he said he was full… we were all surprised as he had had much less than he normally had… anyway…. After we all finished the meal and mum was about to clean the dishes… my second brother came and asked: are there any leftovers? Mum started: why didn’t you eat properly earlier…. My little brother had tears in his eyes and said: I just wanted to make sure everyone was satisfied first… oh that’s my sweet little brother… but it is all past; nowadays, we can have pork dumplings whenever, no need to wait for the New Year or being constrained by the ration stamps…'

(Interviewee 1)

The participant who experienced that period told me how difficult life was due to lack of goods and how life is different now. Surely this is not the only message from this really touching story… even a child, who rarely sees this product, has the resolve and consideration to curb his own consumption to ensure that others are first satisfied. This consideration is the gem – the point that cements the place of ‘thrift’ – but also demonstrates that putting the family above oneself is desirable. This story shares a similar spirit with the classic Chinese story – “Kong Rong shares the pears” (see literature review chapter, section 2.7.3). The participant’s little brother’s virtues resembled those of Kong Rong, who demonstrated the virtue of xiao – respecting his parents and self-cultivation – humble oneself and prioritize family members before oneself.

The story from the participant was a deep memory, that of over half a century ago, yet it is refreshing. It resonates with the Chinese classics that assembled the Chinese virtues through thousands of years of Chinese history. It can be observed that the virtues from the stories are inherited and passed on from generation to generation. The ancient virtues were not forgotten by Chinese consumers, and they are still deeply rooted in those
Chinese consumers’ and provide moral justification in their everyday consumption life and wider social behaviours. And this ‘inherited’ virtue is highly consistent with Confucian’s moral ideas of ren-yi, and the family is where the virtue ren-yi started.

5.4 Harmony – a state of being in Chinese consumption
The Western ideas of ethical consumption can often be seen as notions that reflect three key relationships - human and animals; human and environment and finally relationships between humans. The previous examination has demonstrated that the Western ethical concerns based on these three key relationships were largely ‘unfit’ for Chinese consumers. However, this does not suggest that there are no such perceived relationships among the Chinese consumers. The following sections reveal these three relationships and show the similarities and differences between the Western and Chinese perspectives. There is a common theme that points to the status of harmony and this theme can be sensed from the Chinese consumers’ stories.

5.4.1 The desire for Nike trainers – a battle between thrift and the social environment
In almost all middle and high schools in Beijing, students are required to wear school uniform on a daily basis. Their hairstyle is also under strict rules – simple or short are the primary principles. Under such highly unified standards, trainers have become the way to express one’s individuality – since there are no rules that say which kind of trainers are/are not allowed. Shoes have been given great significance in Chinese history, as the Chinese saying suggests ‘the lack of a good pair of shoes ruins the whole image’ (in Chinese: 脚底下没双好鞋，穷半截). During the discourse around ethical consumption, a participant shared one of her family stories, which also reflects an ethical dilemma – a story about trainers and beyond:

About consumption… I was completely shocked by the younger generations – one of my younger cousin, who just started her 1st year in the local high school. Over the years, she has been always a good girl – an exemplary girl for many. She is very polite and studying very hard; she has been entrusted as the monitor in her class for the entire
three years in her middle school. But lately, through WeChat, she sent me an image – a pair of Nike trainers designed by some Japanese artist. She said she really liked it but she cannot afford it. As her older cousin, I feel obliged to do something for her. So I had a look for her online. Oh my goodness, its 120 Pounds (1,200 Yuan) …

This really worries me. Perhaps, 120 Pounds is not a big deal for some people. But, for her situation – her mother has cancer; although she had surgery last year, but her situation gets worse and has been in the hospital in the past three months; her father had to stop working to look after her mother – perhaps her last few months… You know what that means, if one gets cancer in China – that means it could cost one’s arm and leg (if one belongs to rural area, the medical pension only covers 50-60% of the total cost, the individual needs to pay the rest). In this case, it cost all her family savings, and even that wasn’t enough. Thanks to all the family members help to support her family.

Under such circumstance, my younger cousin expressed her desire for those trainers – it is something completely beyond her family’s means. But as her older cousin, I feel obliged to do something for her. I have been thinking should I buy this trainer for her? I shouldn’t think about it – I should just buy it for her – because she is my cousin and she needs help. But at the same time, I feel worried. Not worrying about the money, but the desire for that trainers. She is only at her 1st year of high school and apparently it has become very common for the students to wear expensive trainers in her school. That’s not quite right. (Interviewee, 14)

This story touched me deeply, the participant’s little cousin’s image stays with me as it brings me a personal memory with Nike trainers – I was about the similar age to the main character in the story above; I loved trainers as it was the only way to show who I was, at least that is what I believed at that time. Everybody was in the same blue uniform at our school – I felt like we were Smurfs. But the trainers reminded me who I was, I was different from
other the students. As I chose the brand, the colour and the design of trainers – it was full self-expression.

As a teenager I was desperate for the trainers. On that Chinese New Year, I accumulated all my red-packets savings and bought a pair of Nike trainers, which I was unable to tell my parents the cost of; as it was simply a number that was unacceptable in my family at that time. But it was totally worth it, as it was not just an ordinary pair of trainers to me; it represented all my dreams, courage and self-identity. Such personal experience explains why this story resonates with me and in particular, because of my personal experience, what enables me to sympathize with the participant’s younger cousin’s feelings. In the meantime, the participant expressed her worry about the commonality of students wearing expensive trainers – something not quite right?

It is not like the past, like our generations, I have got six brothers and sisters; our parents, even they wanted to, were unable to offer us the luxury items. Nowadays, its different, (almost) every family has just got one child – the pearl of the family. As parents, especially after we experienced the time of scarcity, we want to give the best to our child. In the past, people advocate being ‘thrifty’; but this is not very relevant in the modern times. For example, other children wear either Nike or Adidas trainers; how can we let our child down? What we use is not that import anymore, but it is important for my son to feel confident in front of his peers. Of course, it sounds ridiculous to spent 100 Pounds (1,000 yuan) for a pair of trainers in the past; but it is rather normal this day. It is not just our children’s wants; it is this time – comparisons with others have become a phenomenon. We cannot let our child lose on his ‘starting line’. (Interviewee 1)

The above comments from a different participant further reveal what this ‘not quite right’ is about. It worth to paying attention to the ‘comparison’ phenomenon as the participant described – comparison – how others perceive us by what we are wearing, that has become the driving force behind the consumption stories from the Chinese consumers. Such
consumption stories amass a mixture of Chinese values. Firstly, ‘thrift’ which was considered a virtue in Chinese cultural heritage, has to be compromised in front of parents love for their child. This mirrors the compromise in Confucian teachings, as we know that Confucius advocates a thrifty lifestyle, but he did not hold being thirty against the idea of ritual ceremonies. In the contrast, it was considered inappropriate to be without a proper ritual ceremony. In the conflicts of thrift and ritual ceremony, Confucius suggests that it is more import to practice a proper ritual ceremony; and being thrifty as a virtue can be practiced in other aspects of an individual’s life.

Similarly, from the participants’ account, it can be seen that the virtue of being thrifty is something the parents often measure against themselves but not something applicable to their child (also seen the story of the dad who buys New Zealand kiwis). In the dilemma of being thrifty and demonstrating love for a child, Chinese consumers prioritize their child’s need and wants before thrift. From here, we can visualize a scale: on the one side of the scale thrift (in line with modesty); on the other side of the scale is love for a child. It can be seen that the side of love for a child has been given much more weight than the other. There are fundamental cultural roots for this, as Confucius’ moral vision has offered guidelines that parents are obliged to offer the best possible options they can to their children (and there may be ritualistic aspects of ‘the trainers’ as the only point for the creation and expression of identity).

Based on such a moral foundation, it has become a common practice for Chinese parents to provide the best available products they have access to for their children, such as the examples of the parent who offers his son Nike trainers, and the mother who purchased 2,000 Yuan imported powered milk. When this parental love goes beyond a moderate level, it then contributes to the ‘comparison’ phenomenon in terms of consumption within younger generations. As the participant said, he provided the expensive trainers for his son so that his son would have confidence in front of peers; and the language he used ‘we cannot let our child lose on his ‘starting line’. As, if one could not afford expensive trainers, then your child (and by implication you as a parent) becomes somewhat inferior too. It demonstrates the importance
of materialistic goods in contemporary Chinese cultural values, where there is a tendency to judge people from their clothing and what they wearing. The Confucian moral vision emphasizes the intrinsic good of the individual, which seems compromised in the overt expression of parental love.

For most of the Chinese parents, once it comes to their expression of love for child; it could be a delicate situation to control. Love is invisible, we cannot measure it by using a physical scale; as the idiom says ‘love is blind’, however goods become an outward expression of this invisible virtue. From the dilemma of balancing being ‘thrifty’ and ‘love for child, it can also be demonstrated that there is a delicate negotiation between the two. It also suggests the central role of family love in constructing the meanings of ethical consumption among Chinese consumers. Such negotiation also reflects a struggle to achieve a sense of balance and a state of harmony.

In the context of Nike trainers, the participant did not want to disappoint her little cousin; nor did the parent want to let his son down; at the same time, people may still have the idea of being ‘thrifty’, ‘intrinsic good’ at the back of their mind and knowing it is a virtue – but the ‘volume’ of these virtue has been turned down greatly in the consumers’ current life world. What we can learn from this is that the ethics of consumption is not as a simple a virtue or a principle that can be summarized; often it can be a negotiation between the specific virtues within the moral system, as well as social influenced by elements in contemporary Chinese society.

5.4.2 The fast growing chicken and watery pork – that’s against the natural law

While the Western literature pays considerate attention to animal welfare issues presented by ‘no animal testing’ and ‘free-range’, it is a very different picture in China. We established the ‘inappropriateness’ of ‘no animal testing’ and ‘free-range’ from the Chines consumers’ responses in chapter 4. This section reveals the relationship between the Chinese consumers’ consumption in relation to animals further; from the stories below, it explains some of the practical reasons for the lack of fit to the Western animal welfare
concerns; in addition, it offers an account of the Chinese consumers perceived sense of ‘animal welfare’.

I don’t look for free-range; I would be happy if the chicken is not a ‘fast growing chicken’. (Interviewee 7)

Fast growing chicken doesn’t taste good. It tastes… like bready, doesn’t have that succulent real chicken flavour. When my mum cooks chicken, she uses her own chicken - the natural growing chicken. Nothing beats my mum’s chicken and mushroom stew. Fast growing chicken should be prohibited. It is very unnatural and it is against the natural law. (Participant 3, G 4)

In opposition to the free-range chicken; the notion of ‘fast growing chicken’ has also drawn considerate attention among the Chinese consumers. ‘Fast growing chicken’ can be also associated with one of the food safety problems in China. This kind of chicken refers to certain husbandry methods that poultry farms use where lights are used at all times to encourage birds to eat non-stop and grow faster, with a chicken growing from 30 grams to 3.5kg in just 40 days. Such methods also use antibiotics to accelerate the speed at which a chicken grows, which although beneficial to the business, can be inhumane to the chicken and produce toxic chicken meat that is harmful for consumer health. The participant not only mentioned that the taste of fast growing chicken is not good; but also stated that it is something ‘unnatural’ and ‘against natural law’. The sense of the ‘unnatural’ can also be observed from the extract below from another participant.

‘In the past, leaving the pork on the chopping board, and a layer of oil on the board, and the pork felt sticky on the hand. Pork mince and the Chinese leaves dumplings, flavourful real pork meat in every bite...

Nowadays, all pork has a watery sound (in Chinese, ‘啪啪的…’) most pork is water injected…everybody knows and everybody does it… It is obvious why they (businesses) add water, the pork pricing is one of the big problem in China, see how much the pork price has increased. The farmers do not earn money but lose money after all their hard
work… Do some maths here, one-ton water 2.5 yuan (≈ 25 pence) for household and 4 yuan for business purpose, bear this in mind - one ton is equals 1,000 kilos. How much is pork per kilo? One kilo, of the average pork meat, not the best one, is around 40 yuan (≈4 pounds), ten kilo pork 400 yuan (≈ £40); how much can one earn just then by adding 10 kilo water? Electricity and water bills are covered… if without adding water, one will suffer hunger, one will not be able to earn enough, one will have to lose his job, simply like this…’

‘If you go to the butchers in the local market, tell them that ethical product standard is selling pork without adding water, they may beat you to death… maybe this is a bit over the top, at least they will say that you are stupid and kick you out…this is China’ (Interviewee 1)

Pork, of course, it has added water. It all feels watery. But it is useless to worry because they are all like that. As long as the added water is clean… it is okay… (Interviewee 8)

From the stories above about pork, it can be seen that adding water in pork has become another ‘open secret’ in China. Participants who spoke about the practice accept and fully understand the reasons. However, not all participants knew the water-injection method. After investigating, I learnt that the method of injecting water into live pigs is seen as cruel. It often happens 0.5-1 hour before killing. The butcher uses plastic pipes to force water into the pig’s nose, eyes, ears, mouth and anus. In addition, watered meat is less nutritious, it spoils more easily, encourages toxin-producing bacteria, and the practice can spread disease among animals (Chinarealtime, 2009). It is a practice that is harmful for human health and highly exploitative to pigs.

The water injected meat practice in China started in the 1980s in southern China when the Chinese government ended the monopoly in the meat industry. Since then the practice has spread all over the country. According to Feng Ping, an expert at the China Meat Products Integrated Research Centre, who publicly challenged the lack of government oversight that has allowed the practice to go on for over 20 years, in February 2015, five people were imprisoned for being involved in the water-injected pork incident in
Jiang Su provenience (People.cn, 2015). Such incidents again suggest that the practice of adding water to meat is still going on in China and that consumers still live in a situation full of risk when purchasing pork.

Although, the participants expressed their concerns on fast growing chickens and watered pork, their concerns were from their self-interest such as with the taste, the nutrition, the cleanness of the pork. No direct concerns were given to the pigs’ welfare. However, the participant mentioned ‘nature’ and ‘natural law’; and they view fast growing chicken and watery pork as something unnatural. They are not products that follow natural processes. Doing things in a natural way shows respect to nature, including animals. The Chinese consumers point to overall principles in relation to animals, to respect nature. When we respect nature, things will fall into the right place. Things like watered pork, fast growing chicken would not exist. Chinese consumers’ perception in relation to animals, it was not solely a perception of animals, but as human beings in-the-world, using animals as a resources, maintaining harmony. In addition, the Chinese consumers extended the conversation around chicken welfare further.

Talking about chicken’s welfare, how many people still live in tube-shaped apartments (Chinese: 筒子楼; tong zi lou), the whole family share under 20 square metres. The whole floor share one bathroom, is that any better than the chickens’ living conditions? (Interviewee 1)

The tube-shaped apartment mentioned by the participant was developed between 1950-1990 in China and the purpose of such buildings was to fit in more people. However, such a purpose largely ignored people’s living conditions. Although such apartments are gradually being demolished and replaced, there are still many people who live in this type of building. The logic shift from ‘caged chicken’ to ‘tube – shaped apartment’ is important; the participant seems to say: our people still live in such bad and over crowded condition; these issues have not been resolved; how can we then jump to think about chickens’ welfare? Chinese consumers clearly demonstrate their moral position, considerations for people come first; which is consistent with Confucian human centred teachings.
The short extract above suggests that in order to understand Chinese consumers’ ethical concerns in consumption; it is important to look beyond consumption issues themselves – as these form only part of consumers’ daily lives. It is important to understand the wider environment where these consumers live. In this case, chicken’s welfare seems insignificant compared with people’s who are still living in bad conditions. Chinese consumers also reflect their priority as human rather than as animals. This is consistent with the Confucian views towards of animals. From here, we learn that the human and animal relationship cannot be understood solely without acknowledging the wider relationship with the context.

5.4.3 The sensible consumer – being considerate and appropriate in the consumption process

If we think about the Western notion of ethical consumption, the concerns for environment represent a relatively ‘distant’ view. For instance, the concept of ‘organic’ is often perceived as being friendly to the environment. However, the sense of environment does not necessarily associate with an immediate environment right next to the consumers’ neighbourhood or somewhere directly relating to the consumers. Chapter 4 demonstrated the Western ideas around environmental concerns are perceived as distant by Chinese consumers. However, is does not suggest there were no concerns for the environment. Compared with the Western perspective, the Chinese consumers have a very different perception of environmental concerns. The following extracts from participants reveal the sense of environmental concern from Chinese consumers’ perspective, and show the difference from the Western perspective.

To me, ethical consumption is, for example, if I am visiting a tourist area, after I have consumed my snacks and drink, I put the rubbish in the bin rather than leave it all over the place (Interviewee 12).

Let me put it this way, nowadays, we cannot even make rubbish classification happen, don’t even mention about your ‘ethical consumption’. Rubbish has a far more direct and large impact on the environment… (Interviewee 5)
Even if I cared about the environment, I would not care from the consumption aspects, more likely, I would do from: not putting trash on the street, classify rubbish… (Interviewee 3)

The three extracts above are from three individual participants, and each of them offered a different account. However, a similarity is shared – that is the Chinese consumers’ perception of environment. This can be observed from the underlined words. For instance, interviewee 12 mentioned the bin and all over the place, interviewee 5 mentioned rubbish and its direct impact on environment, interviewee 3 mentioned streets and rubbish classification. The commonality from the three participants is that all of them perceive environment as their surroundings, somewhere they have been, or somewhere they are familiar with. It seems evident that their concerns for environment can be seen as the concerns for their immediate environment. The following comment from a participant mirrors the above findings, but from a slightly different perspective.

For example, buying vegetables. You see why the vegetables look bad in the supermarket. When people are buying Chinese leaves, they take off the outside leaves and only pay for the ‘heart of the vegetable’… if they choose potatoes, they pick one and see it’s not good and instead of putting it back with care, they drop it heavily… many bruised vegetables… If in the open market, the private sellers will stop that behaviour and say: don’t do that, how about others? But in the supermarket, nobody is watching customers… (Interviewee 8)

Interviewee 8 offered a different scene that demonstrated her understanding of concerns for environment. Similar to the previous comments, this participant also described an immediate environment – the supermarket environment that directly relates to the consumer; it is a physical environment where the participant has direct interaction. Compared with the Western concerns for environment, Chinese consumers’ perception of the notion of environment is more a physical, immediate environment. As for the Chinese consumers’ concerns, these focus on their direct impacts on their perceived immediate environment, such as dealing with rubbish, avoiding
damaging the products on sale. This, from another aspect, explains why Chinese consumers find it difficult to associate environmental concerns with organic or environmentally friendly products.

From Chinese consumers’ perceived relationship with environment, it can be seen that the Chinese consumers pay close attention to how their behaviour impacts the surroundings. From their expression of how to deal with consumption waste, how to deal with the products on display; it demonstrates a sense of self-regulation. As a consumer, to regulate one’s behaviour is to reduce the harm to the environment. The sense of regulating oneself is often viewed as a direct interaction with the physical environment. From this self-regulated behaviour, one demonstrates care for the environment and achieves a sense of harmony between people and the environment; and that can be viewed as a Chinese sense of environmental concern.

5.4.4 Implications: cultural heritage from Confucius’ teachings

The above three sections reveal three aspects of Chinese consumers’ understandings of the notion of ethical consumption. The stories about Nike trainers, implies the relationship between people (consumers) and the social environment; stories about fast growing chicken and watery pork indirectly imply Chinese consumers perceived human and animal relationship; finally, Chinese consumers expressed their understanding of the environmental concerns, which is an immediate environment that directly relates to them. From the above accounts, we can observe the similarity and difference between the Chinese consumers’ perspective and the Western perspectives.

In response to the Western notion of ethical consumption, which is often seen as three key relationships: human and environment, human and animal, and human and others; it seems that such relationships are also present in the Chinese consumers’ perceptions of the meanings of ethical consumption. However, each relationship’s construction is different in the Chinese and Western perspectives. For instance, the Western notion of environmental concern is more than the immediate physical soundings, and it often expressed as a sense of responsibility for the planet; whereas the Chinese
consumers’ interpretations of environment are more of the environment that directly relates to them. The idea of ‘organic’ almost seem irrelevant in the Chinese consumers’ perception of environmental concerns or ethical consumption.

The human and animal relationship in the West demonstrates the idea of equality; that animals have ‘rights’ just as human do; in contrast, the Chinese consumers’ clearly expressed a different perspective – diversity in harmony. The Chinese consumers focus on the notion of respect to nature - to achieve a sense of balance and harmony. Animals are viewed as resource for human, eating animal meat is not perceived as ‘unethical’ from Chinese consumers’ viewpoint. Equally, the notion of ‘vegetarian’ or ‘vegan’ did not seem relevant in the discourse around ethical consumption among the Chinese consumers. Chinese consumers view animals as being under the governance of human being and have the purpose of serving human beings – providing good resource of food, such ideas also mirror Confucius’ teachings in relation to human and animal relationships.

The human and human relationship in the West is dominated by the idea of human-rights, the protection of individuals; where the Chinese consumers’ consideration does not reflect equal love for all individuals, self-cultivation and the love for one’s family, in particular are key. The child of the Chinese family has become a central concern and driving force of consumption behaviours. Such interpretations are highly consistent with Confucian moral concepts: ‘love with distinction’ and ‘care by gradation’. In dealing with social relationships, Confucius holds that it is important to prioritise family members’ interests when compared with strangers’ interests. It seems evident that the Chinese consumers inherited such moral ideas and Confucian moral teachings are still played out in Chinese consumers thinking and behaviour.

5.5 Chinese characters – in Chinese consumers’ understandings of ethical consumption

“Building a socialist country with Chinese character”, this is the slogan officially used by China to describe its own status; it is possibly one of the most precise and accurate slogans that can be found when this country
refers to itself. It can be seen that “Chinese character” is a powerful force that shapes this country’s form of socialism. Indeed, the “Chinese character” has an influence on various social actions within Chinese society; of course, consumption is not an exception. The “Chinese character” of Chinese consumption can be observed from consumers’ consumption stories and experiences. Although there are many ways of interpreting this Chinese character, it became apparent that this Chinese character has a strong impact on Chinese consumers’ perception of ethical consumption.

5.5.1 Pragmatic concerns: value for money

‘Price premium’ is one of the terms that can often be found in the ethical consumption studies in the Western marketing literature, it often refers to that consumers pay for a ‘little bit more’ for fair trade and organic products (Howard, 2008; Nesheim, 2008). The term ‘price premium’ shows a notion that it worth paying more to ensure that the labours receive living wages; that the products produced meet environmentally standards. In essence, it conveys a sense of ‘value for money’ from an ethical consumption perspective. Discourse around ‘value for money’ also expressed as an issue of concern to Chinese consumers. However, it is interesting to see how the Chinese consumers associate ‘value for money’ with their understandings of ethical consumption. The comments below from the participants illustrate their understanding.

Ethical consumption, the first thing came to me is value for money, is it right that the thing is only worth 1 yuan, but someone can sell it for 100 Yuan? (Interviewee 1)

A cucumber salad, some restaurants sell it for 100 yuan, that’s not right… how much does a cucumber cost (less than 2 Yuan)? There are some ‘sky high price’ products which exist… (Participant 1, G1)

Participants both mentioned the sale of products that are overly expensive and not perceived as being value for money nor ethical. Following participants’ comments, I investigated whether what was described can is reflected in the market. For example, according China News (2010), TASTE is an example of ‘sky high price’ supermarket. It was reported that on its
opening day in Guangzhou in 2010, one imported apple was on sale for RMB160 (about £16); one honey melon imported from Thailand was RMB588 (£58); one fruit box containing one bird nest and few pieces of fruits was on sale for RMB12,988 (about £1,290). Below is an image of the fruit box; it is well presented and considerable attention has been paid to its aesthetics.

Figure 10 A fruit basket on sale for RMB 1,2998
Source: online source retrieved from wenxuecity.com (2012)

The goods should be value for money (in Chinese: 物有所值).
(Interviewee 8)

The goods are overly expensive these days… our Lao baixing simply look for quality and inexpensive goods (物美价廉), practical and economical/tangible benefits (in Chinese: 实惠) (Interviewee 11)

From Chinese consumers’ perspective, it can be observed that they suggested that ethical consumption is characterized by ‘value for money’, with participants seeking for ‘quality and inexpensive’, ‘practical and economical’ goods’ (物有所值，物美价廉，实惠). These phrases were frequently used by participants in relation to different product purchases. As one of the participants reminded me, the names of popular supermarkets, to a greater or lesser extent, reflect what consumers are looking for.
You see what the popular supermarkets names are nowadays, it’s called Wu-Mart, (in Chinese is 物美, literal meaning is quality goods); and another one is Merry-Mart (in Chinese: 美廉美, literal meaning is quality, value for money, quality). (Interviewee 11)

Most consumers are simply looking for quality products at reasonable prices. This reasonable price seeking behaviour, on the one hand, stems from concerns over the perceived unreasonable price phenomenon, some businesses are seen to be seeking supra-normal profits by charging unreasonably high prices. On the other hand, this also reflects consumer consumption values – there is a strong cultural imperative to spend reasonably and moderately.

The passages below are from participants of when they perceived certain products were over-priced or did not match the value received in their purchase (exchange) and use. Purchasing from street sellers naturally becomes one of their alternative choices. Examples can be seen from the following comments.

For example, my wife wanted to buy some hair clippers the other day. It costs over 300 (RMB) in the newly opened shopping mall. But from those street sellers, it only cost a few yuan (RMB). Those kinds of things, if it breaks after few days’ use, we don’t feel any loss [heart pain] (in Chinese: 也不心疼). A few Yuan, doesn’t matter...

(Interviewee 10)

Socks from the supermarket, quite expensive, after two days, worn a hole, but we cannot return it. So things like socks I just purchase from the street sellers, 5 pairs only cost 10 Yuan. If it’s worn after a few days’ use, it’s not a big deal. (Interviewee 7)

Participant comments suggest certain products are expensive in shopping malls or supermarkets, when compared to the life span of the product. Both participants provided a similar scenario that is if the product brakes/is worn after a short period of use, by purchasing from street sellers and paying less, the participants felt it is ‘not a big deal’. In contrast, by paying more money in
a shopping mall or supermarket, participants would feel ‘heart pain’. In a very subtle way, participants are saying that they can associate with the product’s value and its price.

Following the above discussion on value and price, participants commented on organic vegetables and the expensive prices these attract. This can help to demonstrate another perspective of price-value in relation to a specific ethical product range - organic vegetables.

With ‘organic’ label, it means expensive. (G1, participant 2)

Like me - a ‘Lao baixing’ (an ordinary citizen), I know the organic is nice, but it’s too expensive, beyond my affordability... (Interviewee 13)

Ethical products such as organic vegetables are normally around 20-25 RBM per 500 grams in supermarkets such as Carrefour and Wal-Mart. Organic branded vegetables are considered ‘high-end’ products, which can be ten times more expensive than conventional vegetables (Yu, 2011). As the participant suggested, even if she desires organic products, the expensive price simply places it out of her means. Therefore, participants raised the following questions:

So why are so called ethical products so expensive? If we all purchase so called ethical products which is way more expensive than the ordinary ones, in a way, we are encouraging the higher price on this type of products. If we can have access to reasonably priced ethical products, then ordinary products will automatically lose in terms of the competition... (Participant 3, G1)

The participant’s comments on organic products further developed the previous argument where Chinese consumers’ perception of ethical consumption is associated with their perceived price matching to perceived value. The question Chinese consumers raised helped to reflect on the current ethical consumption stereotype, and why ethical products should necessarily be more expensive, and why consumers cannot have access to reasonably priced ethical products? Chinese consumers, presented a different yet interesting perspective that paying more for organic products is
not necessarily ethical, as it encourages price growth – which is ‘unethical’ in itself.

5.5.2 A sense of patriotism
The Western notion of ethical consumption has an exclusive focus on purchasing choices – ethical alternatives or conventional products, which does not give much emphasis to counterfeit product purchasing. However, Chinese consumers perceive counterfeit products as highly relevant in their understandings of ethical consumption. Chinese consumers’ discussions on counterfeit products consumption are represented by more than one view. For example, part of the Chinese consumers hold that purchasing counterfeit products is ‘unethical’, whilst other participants suggested that it is better to buy [Chinese] counterfeit products than to support Western companies’ such as Nike or Adidas. A sense of this ‘nationalist’ overtone can be seen in the conversation below:

Real Nike shoes or fake Nike shoes cannot be distinguished. They are often made in the same factory; the difference is that the so called ‘real’ one is authorized. (Participant 1, G4)

Foreign brands such as Nike, Adidas, I think we should try to avoid them because most of the profits are taken by the other countries. Domestic brands, we should support more. Take an example, iPhones are made in Chinese factories; they are sold very cheaper in the USA, but they are very expensive to Chinese consumers. So (it is obvious) who dose the hard work and who earns the most money? (Participant 3, G4)

Ethical concern, shifted from the ‘individual level’ to a ‘national level’. Participants suggested that it is important to support domestic brands and expressed their concerns that foreign brands or companies are the biggest winner from Chinese consumers’ purchase choices. A sense of patriotic feeling was aroused. There were participants who expressed this even more directly, for instance:
I support national produce…thinking of Diaoyu Islands (Chinese: 钓鱼岛: Diao yu dao), I am anti made-in-Japan. (Participant 2, G2)

The above expression seems carries a sense of patriotism, as it is directly related to one's political stance. This Chinese consumer who holds an anti-made in Japan perspective based on a territorial dispute over a group of uninhabited islands known as the Diaoyu Islands (currently in China) and the Senkaku Islands (currently part of Japan). Such expression can be associated with the concept of 'boycott', which was used as an expression of protest in the above comment.

It is not something new to be ‘anti’ certain countries’ produce. For example, ‘anti made-in-China’ was one of the protests going on in the Western world in the name of the free Tibet movement. Other more positive campaigns have been support ‘Made in the USA’ and ‘Germany buy German made’. It can be seen that Chinese consumers’ reactions are just like consumers from other parts of the world. This mirrors that consumer behaviour, especially when boycotting a product often represents certain political stances. This further reflects the complicated nature of consumption behaviour; it is naïve to study consumer behaviour in an imagined vacuum without acknowledging the complexity (e.g. political, cultural and historical) inherent in the consumption environment. The above example demonstrates that political stance is one of the contributors to such complexity.

5.5.3 Necessity, modesty and thrift

In the previous discussions, we learnt that within the Chinese cultural values, Confucianism is still influential in many aspects of Chinese consumer moral positions, their understanding of ethical consumption, and their consumption behaviours. However, Chinese consumers’ stories such as Nike trainers and New Zealand kiwis, has raised the question about the resilience of the Chinese virtues in the modern China? When Chinese consumers face the negotiation between other social elements, such as parental love and social status, to what extent do the traditional virtues have an impact? The following comments reveal the importance of the traditional Chinese virtues, which are deeply rooted within Chinese consumers.
My understanding of ethical consumption …is living thriftily…
(Interviewee 3)

Yes, that may be an ethical product, very nice, but do I really need it? I am not buying it because it is an ethical product; I only buy it because it is a necessary product. So when I consume, firstly, I think if it’s necessary… secondly, I consider if the value matches to the price… (Interviewee 8)

Rather than emphasizing which product is more ethical or the ‘ethical’ choices, Chinese consumers pointed out the fundamental issues of consumption: the necessity to consume. Participant comments reflect the nature of being ‘ethical’, purchasing for necessity, not simply something that has an ethical label or logo. This is in contrast to the current mainstream thinking in ethical consumption and ethical marketing, which exclusively encourages ethical consumption behaviour and guides consumers to purchase certain ethical products. For example, the well-established UK *Ethical Consumer* magazine is one of the pioneers in the ethical consumption movement. It tells the reader how ethical each business and their products are by providing several dimensions to evaluate the business’ ethical practice, which seem to offer a certain transparency to enable consumers to choose which company, brand and products are more ‘ethical’.

Following the logic of the *Ethical Consumer*, a committed Western ethical consumer may spend time reading their magazine, comparing alternative products to figure out what would be the most ethical choices in each product range. Compared with this committed ethical consumer, a Chinese consumer does not read ‘*Ethical Consumer*’, as such magazines do not exist in China at the moment. Chinese consumers do their shopping without such an ‘ethical guide’ but are simply directed by ‘buying necessities and considering value for money’. Buying what is necessary shows respect for the traditional Chinese cultural value ‘thrift’. By suggesting that buying what is necessary is ethical, participants are suggesting that buying things that are not necessary is not ethical (or unethical). One participant provided an example to illustrate what he thought ‘ethical consumption’ is:
Ethical consumption to me is spending based on my income; consuming within my ability. For example, I earn 10,000 Yuan (RMB) each month, but I want to drive a car which costs over 1,000,000 Yuan (RMB). I don’t think it’s appropriate and it is unnecessary. Maybe when I earn 100,000 Yuan (RMB) per month, it might be okay to drive car worth 1,000,000 yuan (RMB). That’s about right… (Interviewee 9)

The participant suggested that it is important to spend based on one’s income. Such a view also reflects Confucius’ view on consumption where ‘live within your means and moderate consumption’ is considered as a rule in traditional Confucian values (Kong, 2009). Moderate consumption can also reflect admiration towards the notion of ‘moderation’ in traditional Chinese culture. As a Chinese idiom says (过犹不及, guò yóu bù jí): ‘going too far is as bad as not going far enough’; beyond is as wrong as falling short; too much is as bad as too little; excess is just as bad as deficiency (Confucian The Analects, 2014). Confucian teachings suggest that an ideal status is being balanced and harmonious, neither too less nor too much.

Over-consumption, however, has been largely neglected in current ethical consumption studies, where most of the interest in ethical consumption has explored the attitude-behaviour gap in ethical consumption, or how to encourage more ethical purchasing. Beyond ethical consumption in the marketing literature, social researchers such as Guha and Advani (2006) have questioned how much a person should consume. This was a very important issue for participants who often asked how much an individual should consume. Participants’ comments on ethical consumption also suggest the importance of consuming moderately and thriftily in Chinese culture. Such consumption values can be traced back to ancient Confucian teaching: where the Master highly praised Hui who lived a simply, thrifty and humbly (details can be seen in section literature review chapter, section 2.7.1). According to the Chinese Confucius researcher Kong (2007), Confucius’ teaching has an important impact on Chinese consumption values: living thriftily is considered as the prime virtue in consumption. Confucius
also advocated moderate and rational consumption. These traditional values are still needed and useful; they provide basic guidance in contemporary Chinese consumers’ consumption practice.

5.6 Concluding remarks
The interpretation of Chinese consumers’ accounts of the meanings of ethical consumption in China was a constant looking back and forth process between literature review and the data sets. A dialogue between what I learned in the literature review and what Chinese consumers say. The literature review is rather like a dinner table, which laid out the dishes from the West and China; the Western dish was named the concept of ethical consumption, the ingredients of the dish were several ethical concerns; and this dish presents a rights-based moral position. The Chinese dish’s design was not formulated in the literature review due to lack of ‘material’, but we sense that the Chinese dish has its strong cultural roots. The details of the Chinese dish and the way it was prepared were unknown. Chapter 5 has revealed these elements more clearly.

It can be observed that Chinese consumers’ understandings of ethical consumption are not unified. Their interpretations of Chinese consumption are largely based on their lived life experiences; thus the construction of the meanings of ethical consumption are impacted by various elements such as Chinese cultural, social and political context; historical as well as contemporary dynamics in China. Among all these influences, it became evident that the Confucian teachings are still deeply rooted in Chinese consumers and speak through Chinese consumers in their daily consumption life. As this chapter has revealed, Chinese consumers emphasize trustworthiness in consumption, their concerns for the family and their relationship with the nature – let nature take its course to achieve a sense of harmony, all these are reflected Chinese consumers’ virtue-based moral positions. This is in sharp contrast with the Western rights-based moral ideas, in particular, notions such ‘equality’ and ‘fairness’ were not present in the same form in the Chinese consumers’ understandings of ethical consumption. Instead, the ideas of harmony and difference in diversity are strongly presented by Chinese consumers.
The notion of ‘social justice’ and ‘protection of individuals’, can be observed from the Chinese consumers’ presentations. However, the connotation of social justice and protection of individuals were different from the West. For instance, social justice comes from the central concerns of the family, and does not emphasize equal distribution – in particular caring for distant social actors. The protection of individuals also starts from an inward approach by protecting one’s own family first and then moving outward. This is very indifferent to the Western notion of ethical consumption that represents an outward looking view. However, this does not claim that Chinese consumers have no sympathy towards distant social actors at all, it demonstrates that there is a clear order and priority the Chinese consumers follow, and family always comes first before concerns for others. Equally, this is not to claim that Confucian moral ideas are the only influential values working in Chinese consumers’ lives, in the modern world, quite often, Chinese consumers’ ethics of consumption can be constructed as a reaction to contemporary situations and the current social environment, as the example of ‘the desire for Nike trainers’, illustrated.

There is no short answer for what constitutes Chinese ethical consumption as it includes a vast range of concerns, activities and moral negotiations. One way to demonstrate the Chinese sense of ethical consumption is to convey the core ideas from the Chinese consumers lived stories, and the links to a Confucian virtue-based moral vision. These can be presented as:

Chinese ethical consumption is about trustworthiness in consumption, that consumers are trusted by the merchants and the merchants are expected to demonstrate their trustworthiness to the Chinese consumers by providing safe and quality products. A trustworthy relationship can then be established, merchant and consumers co-exist in the marketing system harmoniously, with a mutual trust and respect. This is also about the goodness of the individuals as well the business organizations being virtuous.

The Chinese sense of ethical consumption can also be presented as: love the family. The Chinese consumers’ stories demonstrated the central role of the family. It seems that the Chinese consumers’ concerns are layered – their own family’s welfare is at the centre and then as we move outwards this
then pertains to others’ welfare – but the idea of proximity is key. There is a clear ‘order’ of love and concerns can be observed from the Chinese consumers. ‘Love with distinction’ and ‘care by gradation’ are strongly presented in the Chinese consumers lived experiences and their consumption stories. This does not suggest that there is lack of social justice, but it shows the Chinese sense of social justice and the ideas of individual protection are based on the idea of family love. In the construction of the meanings of Chinese ethical consumption, the importance of ‘family’ should not be underestimated.

In addition, it worth noting that the sense of Chinese ethical consumption is also beyond its relatively simple presentation here, it sometimes can be a negotiation between different virtues, for example, parental love and thrift; it can also be a compromise between virtues and practical issues; it can also be shaped by a combination of traditional virtues and contemporary Chinese characters (e.g. peng-xi, qian-cui-ze). Chinese consumers’ understanding of ethical consumption is not a rigid image; their understanding of this notion has flexibility and may be changed in the fast developing environment. However, that cultural root - Chinese Confucianism and its impacts - should not be neglected in future research, as Confucianism has demonstrated its resilience and persistence in Chinese society.

Towards the end of my searching for the meanings of Chinese ethical consumption, what I learned from the Chinese consumers is, perhaps, that there is no need for a label or justification of the concept of (Chinese) ethical consumption. After all, it is not a concept of ethical consumption that makes a person an ethical consumer; it is the other way around. Consumption, as part of the picture of the overall life, cannot be separated; consumers’ consumption stories are also their life stories, ethical consumption, therefore is about how to live a virtuous life and be a moral person. The Chinese consumers convey the messages that ‘the way it should be’ for us – the natural way for us - is ‘the ethical way’. The sense of Chinese ethical consumption then can be understood as a state of being – a harmonious family, a harmonious relationship with the environment including animals,
and a harmonious consumption system – ethical consumption is in essence ‘harmonious consumption’.
Chapter 6. Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

In the writing of this thesis, the key research questions have been addressed and I am able to extend responses to issues surrounding ethical consumption in China. However, at a national, and personal, level there is much that remains unresolved – I was naively hoping that by the time I completed this thesis that there would be a resolution in my country for the air pollution that blights my hometown – Beijing – and many other cities in China. I sincerely wished that when returning to my hometown and landing in the Beijing Capital Airport, that I would no longer experience the smell of the unclean air and grey sky, which, for me, arouse feelings of sorrow. And that I would then not have the now familiar conversation with my father, who has always said to me in the past five or six years or so: “it’s only overcast; tomorrow will be sunnier”. His optimistic, yet sanguine, attitude are typical of the perspectives encountered – ones of balance, ones that resonate with traditional values, yet appreciate and accommodate the realities of contemporary China. I cannot however stop wishing that the children in my hometown were able to see blue skies, starry nights and the fireflies of summer, as ‘we’ used to.

While the above wishes remain just that; my curiosity to understand the subject of ‘ethical’ consumption has endured, if not, perhaps more accurately, having been heightened. Whilst responding to my research questions further lines of inquiry appeared, which point to the understanding of different cultural values and belief system. Understanding what is ‘ethical’ is not straightforward: the concept of ethics deals with morals or the principles of morality; pertaining to right and wrong in conduct, which can vary under different situations and contexts. Ethical consumption, whether it is it is deemed a myth or a controversial phenomenon, largely depends on the environment that consumers live in and the life experiences that shape their understanding of what constitutes ethical consumption is in their everyday activities.
The purpose of this concluding chapter is not to merely provide a summary of previous chapters, but to develop the thesis further. To take a musically-based example, classical symphonies typically end with a fast movement marked ‘allegro’ or ‘presto’, rather than a simple recapitulation of earlier themes; they take these themes up and present a stimulating resolution to them in a final movement (Silverman, 2013) – the purpose of the thesis conclusion is to present such stimulation. Hence, this concluding chapter does not simply review the findings – to present a Chinese perspective of ethical consumption compared with a Western one; it also seeks to move beyond this and aims to express conclusions from a series of reflections based on this study of ethical consumption.

This series of reflections are derived from a comparative understanding of the concept of ethical consumption in a Western and Chinese context. The reflections developed from this comparative understanding can be seen as being built on three major aspects: the first is that after reviewing the concept of Western ethical consumption, the ‘inappropriateness’ of this concept in China does not suggest its irrelevance more broadly. Rather, the Western concept of ethical consumption offers a fresh perspective and helps as a basis for reflection upon on the contemporary Chinese ‘ethical’ agenda. Secondly, although this study’s context is set in China, the context does not just simply add a Chinese view, but it helps this research to reflect upon, and provide a reappraisal of, the Western concept of ethical consumption. From this juxtaposition, this research widens the spectrum of the concept of ethical consumption, and in addition offers suggestions for future research. Thirdly, the study of the concept of ethical consumption inevitably brings the central discourse to ‘moral foundations’, thus a re-evaluation of existing moral principles and their implications in consumers’ consumption life has to be reintroduced to the research agenda.

6.2 The concept of ethical consumption: a comparison between a Chinese and Western perspective

Theory without data is empty; data without theory say nothing.’ - David Silverman (2013, p.377)
The data chapters highlighted the difference between the essence of Chinese ethical consumption and what the Western literature described as ethical consumption; the differences can be seen in two layers: Chinese consumers’ responses and their interpretations of the concept (which are presented in chapters four and five respectively). In order to summarise the major differences between the Chinese and the Western perspectives of ethical consumption, the following table is provided. It is worth noting that ethical consumption in either the Chinese or the Western context can be far more complex than the table below suggests. However, simplification helps to demonstrate and present the major differences in a straightforward format. The detailed stories, personal experiences, and rich meanings of a Chinese perspective that this table draws upon can be located in the data chapters.

Table 11 The concept of ethical consumption: a comparison from a Chinese and the Western perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of the Concept of Ethical Consumption Compared</th>
<th>A Chinese Consumers’ Perceptive</th>
<th>The Western Literature Highlighted</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Highlighted responsibilities</td>
<td>government, businesses and organizations, consumers</td>
<td>consumers – particularly as individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The focus</td>
<td>as a process: pre-purchasing, making purchasing choices, actual purchasing behaviour, post-purchase consumption behaviour</td>
<td>focused solely on making purchase choices and buying decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ethical concerns</td>
<td>trustworthiness, centrality of family, harmonious status</td>
<td>environmental concerns, animals’ welfare, human rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Examples of</td>
<td>e.g. safe products, ‘good’</td>
<td>e.g. free-range, organic,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### Aspects of the Concept of Ethical Consumption Compared

<table>
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<th>ethical products</th>
<th>A Chinese Consumers’ Perceptive</th>
<th>The Western Literature Highlighted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>quality products, natural produce, a product matching its label, products meeting hygiene standards</td>
<td>fair trade, no animal testing, cruelty-free, sweat shop-free, products made from recycled materials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. **Ethics of consumption**

- ren-yi, cheng-xin,
- moderation and thrift, protection of the family

| 6. Moral foundation | virtues-based moral vision | rights-based moral principles |

This table was developed from a combination of the literature review on ethical consumptions, data analysis and study findings. In terms of its content, the elements in the column underneath the heading “The Western Literature Highlighted” are obtained from the literature review and the other column “A Chinese Consumers’ perspective” are derived from the data analysis. Each item derived from the data analysis can be traced back to source material in the data chapters. This table highlights the different, and similar, understandings of ethical consumption in a Chinese context and in the Western literature.

Six aspects of ethical consumption were compared, as the left column illustrates, including (1) highlighted responsibilities, (2) the focus, (3) ethical concerns, (4) examples of ethical products, (5) ethics of consumption, (6) moral foundation. Aspects (1-4) in the Western Literature Column are
explicitly derived from the definitions of ethical consumption (detailed discussions can be seen in section 2.2). For example, one of the definitions of ethical consumption is the degree to which consumers prioritise their own ethical concerns when making product choices (Shaw & Clarke, 1998, p.163). A similar definition was provided by Cooper-Martin and Holbrook (1993, p.113) who see ethical consumer behaviour as “decision-making, purchases and other consumption experiences that are affected by the consumer’s ethical concerns”. In addition, O’Rourke (2006, p.291) stated: “ethical consumption is about [consumers] taking the time to look beyond the clean, glossy packing [of the products] to the background of what is presented and making choices and purchases based on that knowledge [associated with ethical concerns]”.

It can be observed that in the definitions, although suggested by different researchers at different times, the key elements are very similar. Firstly, individual consumer’s responsibilities are highlighted as the subject of the definitions; this aspect is presented in the table as (1) ‘highlighted responsibilities’. Secondly, the Western definitions do not deal with the whole process of consumption, but exclusively highlight decision making and purchase; this contributes to aspect two in the table, shown as (2) ‘the focus’. Thirdly, ethical concerns are commonly used to define ethical consumption, the three widely agreed categories of concern are: environmental concerns; concerns for animal welfare; and concerns for human rights. As such, (3) ‘ethical concerns’ is used as the third aspect in the table. Fourthly, the other important object mentioned in the definitions is (4) ‘ethical products’.

Compared with the four aspects explicitly described in the Western literature, Chinese consumers provided a different perspective. Firstly, instead of solely emphasizing individual consumers’ responsibilities in ethical consumption, Chinese consumers highlighted that ethical consumption responsibilities are closely bound to consumers, businesses and government. As the data chapters illustrate, Chinese consumers expressed the opinion that businesses need to demonstrate their responsibilities to providing safe and high-quality products as a basic requirement for consumers to participate in ethical consumption and the Chinese government needs to take action to
regulate the market. In contrast to descriptions the Western literature, Chinese consumers found it difficult to accept their responsibility to demand, or foster, this – the expectation was bound to the notions of responsibility vested in a traditional view of hierarchy, as the Lao baixing mentality demonstrated.

Secondly, rather than only being concerned with the decision making process, as the Western literature highlights, Chinese consumers naturally view ethical consumption as a whole process, including: pre-consumption (e.g. to consider the necessity of the consumption); their actual shopping behaviour on the shop floor (e.g. avoid damaging products); and their post-consumption behaviour (e.g. how to deal with their waste). This however, does not suggest that the Western literature does not consider consumers’ pre- and post-consumption behaviours. Rather that it pursues pre- and post-consumption behaviours as separate issues – set aside from ethical consumption, often categorized as pro-environmental behaviour, or environmentally friendly behaviour. As a consequence, ethical consumption studies are propelled to exclusively focus on consumers’ buying habits and decision making. In other words, the current conception of ethical consumption in the Western literature primarily represents a ‘marketing perspective’, with the goal of persuading customers to buy ethical alternatives to conventional products.

Thirdly, compared with the three major ethical concerns in the Western literature, the Chinese consumers’ concerns demonstrate some of the fundamental differences between a Chinese and the Western understanding of ethical consumption. Western ethical concerns are often phrased as environmental, animal welfare concerns and human rights. When Chinese consumers were faced with those ethical concerns, they found it difficult to apply them to their consumption practice. In contrast, they expressed their ethical concerns in consumption differently - these were trustworthiness, the centrality of family and achieving a sense of harmony in their consumption life - these concerns are also closely related to their wider activities and not simply focused on ‘consuming’.
Fourthly, ethical products in the Western literature are commonly associated with certain characteristics such as free-range, organic, fair trade, no animal testing, and sweatshop free. Chinese consumers offered a different perspective of ethical products based on their life experience. A broader category of products was considered to represent ethical products. For example, safe products (those that will not harm the consumer’s family or themselves) and real products (those that are what their packaging claims them to be); such ‘ethical’ product ranges are not mentioned in the Western literature. However, they were seen as central issues by Chinese consumers. This again reflects the consumption and larger social environment in which those Chinese consumers live and how their experiences in such an environment have impact on their understanding of what ethical products are.

Aspect (5) ‘ethics of consumption’, is not directly described in the definitions of ethical consumption in the Western literature, but the close relationship between the concept of ethical consumption and ethics of consumption cannot be denied. The Western concept of ethical consumption highlights that the ethics of consumption are based on the fundamental principles of fairness, equality, social justice and protection of the individuals (detailed discussions can be found in section 2.2.4). Therefore, to purchase alternative ‘ethical products’ that overtly respond to these elements is encouraged. The Chinese consumers’ ethics of consumption are different: traditional Chinese virtues – Confucian teachings in particular - act as a significant influence. The virtues of ren-yi, cheng-xin, moderate and thrift can be found speaking through Chinese consumers’ stories and experiences, in addition, Chinese consumers’ ethical positions start with their consideration for the family and then extended to wider society.

Aspect (6) ‘moral foundation’, from the Chinese consumers’ accounts of ethical consumption, it become evident that the Western rights-based moral principles do not resonate with them, as Chinese consumers have their own moral resource: that of the traditional Chinese cultural values – Reconstructionist Confucianism. Although the Confucian moral vision was abandoned in recent Chinese history, it has demonstrated it resilience and its impacts in modern China. Quite often, Chinese consumers refer to a
Confucian teaching without realising that they do so; this serves to show that Confucianism has been deeply rooted in Chinese consumers, and Confucian wisdom has been passed on by the generations. This serves to reinforce that Confucianism remains a strong cultural precept that provides a major plank of the moral framework evident in contemporary Chinese society.

This section provides an overview of the differences of a Chinese the Western perspective of ethical consumption. Based on this comparison, a series of reflections have been made, the following sections reveal the major reflections on these three aspects. They are: reflections from a Chinese perspective, reflections on the Western literature, and a re-evaluation of moral foundations.

6.3 Ethical consumption: reflections from a Chinese perspective
As with many stories, after initially forging out in new directions the journey eventually leads back to deep inward reflection. As depicted in the story in *The Alchemist* (Coelho, 1988), an Andalusian shepherd boy named Santiago, who started his adventure in order to discover the meaning of his recurring dream and find ‘treasure’, eventually realizes that the real treasure is worth more than gold – and what Santiago finds are 'Personal Legends'. This research journey started with the pursuit of the Western concept of ethical consumption, but it takes me back to a re-appreciation of my home country, the place where I was born and raised. This research experience has offered me a different perspective to review and reflect upon some of the key issues in consumption and its context in China; my reflection is composed of three aspects: cultural, social and political reflections in (and on) China.

6.3.1 Cultural values (or virtues) as invisible hands
This thesis not only offers a detailed account of the Chinese sense of ethical consumption as ‘harmonious consumption’, but also demonstrates that the power of ‘invisible hands’ – Chinese cultural values (or virtues) – is at work behind consumers’ everyday consumption experiences. From this study, two features of the Chinese cultural values can be observed. On the one hand, traditional Chinese cultural values, embodied in Reconstructionist Confucianism, remain important in Chinese consumers’ moral justifications in
their daily consumption. These values (perhaps better expressed as virtues) include: the central role of family, the virtue of moderation and thrift, the virtue of trustworthiness (cheng-xin), humanity and righteousness (ren-yi). In many cases, Chinese consumers unconsciously refer to these moral teachings in their consumption stories. This strongly suggests the resilience of Confucian wisdom and its practical relevance in contemporary China.

If we follow the precepts of a classical Confucian moral vision, the consumption stories should be highly reflective of the harmoniousness and balance that ought to be present in Chinese society. However, from Chinese consumers’ consumption stories it is evident that the consumption environment is problematic and there are critical issues that need to be tackled, such as the food safety and the lack of trustworthiness in the market system. We cannot help but ask the question ‘why’ these issues are present. By reflecting on contemporary Chinese society, it seems that the society does not conform to the ideal described under the guidance of a Confucian moral vision. It reflects a fast changing China, one that is still, in part, deeply rooted in traditional Confucian cultural values, but also one where the impact of a changing environment, or perhaps something else, is keenly felt.

This ‘something else’ - that goes beyond the traditional cultural values - can perhaps be best encapsulated by deployment of a fabricated word ‘Fetchism’ (拿来主义). The word is based on the root ‘fetch’ in the sense of ‘bringing something back’, and is then augmented by ‘-ism’ to show a distinctive practice and system, some may view it as a philosophy and the word was coined by the leader of modern Chinese literature - Lu Xun - in 1934. Fetchism was originally used to demonstrate the issues faced by the Chinese when confronted with Western cultural influences in comparison to their cultural heritage - it spoke of the difficulties of how to make a choice, how to find a way to live in 'modern' China. At that time, there were two major views: one was that of the ‘closed door policy’ and the other once was 'wide open to the West'. Faced with these two views, Lu Xun suggested we should not passively close ourselves off, nor accept everything from the West, rather we should be selective and take what is practically helpful and useful - in
essence, ‘bringing back’ to Chinese culture and practice what is of benefit to it. However, this form of ‘-ism’ has been used out of context and is widely misinterpreted. As the leader of Democratic Progressive Party, Lin Cho-shui (2012) argued, “many Democratic Progressive Party leaders did not seek real understandings, but simply adopted Fetchism, moving back and forth from different approaches; in the long term, in national, and in particular, international contexts, trustworthiness and reliability failed to be established”.

Mirroring the political statement above, there has been a tendency to simply adopt Fetchism. This was further facilitated by the cultural re-evaluation (1966-1976), which rejected traditional Confucian cultural values and thus offered ‘space’ for the growth of Fetchism. This Fetchism is a vague notion that can be expressed differently based on different moral positions. Given China’s fast economic development and urbanization process, material wealth and money have become significant, relevant and important, and many of the parameters of Fetchism have thus been selected based on ‘financial gains’ and the evident materialist positions expressed in Western consumption. As an outcome, as many commentators (e.g. He, 2015) have suggested there is evidence of a moral decay in China and there is a need to reclaim Chinese traditional cultural values; this study’s findings also convey such a call from Chinese consumers.

This is not to suggest that Western values are ‘corrupting’ (or indeed corrupt); but rather that the selective appropriation of certain values, and perhaps more accurately their dislocation from the wider moral precepts that created them, and then insertion into a society founded on different moral foundations is bound to be problematic. Fetchism has led to a stripping out of the foundations of the Western values that have been commandeered – and as with most sequestered items – those that take them rarely have the same understanding and appreciation of the items as the ‘owners’ do. This appropriation thus leads to tensions – uneasy bad fellows are created and issues arise from the working out of these ill-fitting items in everyday life.

In this instance, perhaps one of the most striking resulting tensions is that between the individual consumer and the system(s) in which they reside and
operate. The systems in this context can be seen at different levels: that of
the overarching ‘society’; that of the governmental and legislative, and, that
of the commercial producers and merchants. The issues at these different
levels are examined in the following discussions – which start with
examination of the societal.

6.3.2 Societal needs: reconstructing the moral framework
This study’s findings firstly suggest that the Western concept of ethical
consumption does not resonate with contemporary Chinese society.
Undoubtedly, cultural differences play a significant role in the understandings
of the notion of ethical consumption. However, the ‘inappropriateness’ of the
Western the concept of ethical consumption is not the final conclusion of this
study, it suggests something further. From Chinese consumers’ discourses
around consumption experiences, their voices reflect the wider social context
and social problems – that of ‘moral decay’. As one of the story’s suggests
‘helping someone who fell from the bike has become one of the riskiest
things’: people’s need is to firstly protect their family and themselves, as a
consequence, little attention is given to wider social issues.

Such a change of moral measures is reflected by a popular contemporary
Chinese saying: “prostitution is more accepted than poverty (笑贫不笑娼)”.
Here the notion is that provisioning for the self (and thus one’s family)
through any means available is preferable to ‘living without’ – no matter what
the cost to the individual or the nature of the activity and its relative impact on
society more broadly. The importance of ‘financial gain’ and the demonizing
of poverty are striking. Poverty is not simply a social situation of deprivation –
it has become repugnant to the individual and to others – it is ‘wrong’ and
perhaps even more tellingly, those that are poor are depicted as being
‘wrong’, and without the moral fortitude to lift themselves from this state – no
matter how.

The Western concept of ethical consumption, although it has its own
limitations and issues as a concept, helps to a degree to illuminate the moral
issues in China - even though it offers little in the way of resonance to
consumers. The constant growth of the Chinese economy does not appear
to have been matched by growth, or development, in the society's morality aspects. Perhaps counter intuitively at many levels, the money driven social atmosphere appears to have decreased the standards of morality - access to wealth has brought with it opportunities but limited frameworks from which to make 'moral decisions'. In some ways economic growth has 'outstripped' the moral – the values frameworks that are in place have had little time to adsorb, adapt, and cement 'wealth creation' and its circulation in the contemporary Chinese consumption context.

There is an urgent need to re-establish a framework that can assist in the reconstruction of the moral base in Chinese society, as such a framework is the soul of a country. Moral decay, or perhaps more optimistically put, an ethical awakening (He, 2015) rests upon the ability of China and its people to reflect and decide which path to take, how to enfold the issues that they face and move beyond 'Fetchism' to something better configured, less a 'sequestering' of Western values – but more a reconstructing of the moral framework that builds on traditional Chinese virtues, alters understandings as needed, but does not lose sight of what are the precepts of Chinese morality. As such this will hopefully move to resolving the tensions between the individual and the wider social issues at play.

The virtue of ‘trustworthiness’ is emphasized by Chinese consumers. Chinese consumers long for ‘trustworthiness’ in consumption, which once more points to business, organizational, and government responsibilities. Chinese consumers expressed a strong desire for safe and good quality products, seeking a sense of trustworthiness in consumption (e.g. products that match their labels; full weight). For them this is primary in their understanding of the constitution of ethical consumption in China. Such ethical concern demonstrates Chinese consumers’ requirements of (and for) business ethics. Such a sense of ‘trustworthiness’ is not emphasized within the Western ethical consumption literature. However, again this does not suggest the absence of concern for business ethics in the Western literature more broadly – but rather that to a large degree that such issues around product quality are now ‘taken for granted’.

238
Indeed, the development of the notion ethical consumption in the West demonstrates that the ‘focus’ on ethics in marketing has shifted from business ethics to consumer ethics over the past decades. In other words, the ethics of consumption was initiated from business ethics, but in a developing understanding of business ethics, interests in individual consumers’ ethics emerged and the consideration of business ethics was somewhat ‘lost’ from discussions of ethical consumption. Such a development path, to a degree, helps to explain the reasons that Chinese consumers consistently bring out business ethics and business responsibilities in their discourse of ethical consumption.

It suggests that there is a current lack of attention to business ethics in China, that there is a need to raise business ethics within the broader social agenda and that the importance of business involvement in ethical consumption practices in China needs to be considered. Solely understanding individual Chinese consumer’s ethical responsibility, without pairing it with business ethics is not effective. Future research into ethical consumption in China is encouraged to also explore business ethics issues, such as corporate social responsibility, to obtain an overall understanding of consumption ethics in China.

The next moral thread that Chinese consumers presented is closely related to a status of being ‘in harmony’. A harmonious state includes relationships with the natural environment and animals as well as relationships with the family and wider society. In this sense, the ethical concern for ‘harmony’ has some overlap with Western ethical concerns, but it takes a different form. For example, Chinese consumers’ expressed their longing for ‘natural’ produce, without chemical sprays, which is similar to the Western sense of organic. Organic produce is free from chemicals and ‘friendly’ to the natural environment. In relation to animals, Chinese consumers often mentioned ‘fast growing’ chickens, which is seen as being against the animal’s natural growing cycle; Chinese consumers also asked for ‘natural’ chicken that respects it ‘harmonious’ cycle. Although Chinese consumers did not mention the chicken’s welfare in particular, their requirement for a chicken that grows
naturally echoes the outcomes and principles of animal welfare presented in the Western literature.

Another good example is water-injection free pork. To Chinese consumers, the pork should be ‘natural’ - meaning without added water. As the data chapter described the water injection process is extremely brutal. Chinese consumers’ requirement for water free pork, would indirectly protect the animals from the painful and cruel water injection process. In other words, requirements such as this protect both the consumers’ and the animal’s welfare. It can be seen that Chinese consumers are not familiar with a vocabulary such as ‘cruelty free’, ‘or ‘no animal testing’, they simply ask for ‘natural produce’ and produce that respects its essential harmonious nature in the way it is produced.

Chinese consumers have also highlighted the centrality of family. It became apparent that consumption is not just an activity, it is a vehicle to express their love and caring for their family. This also echoes with their strong calling for trustworthiness in consumption in that consumers look for safe and high quality products that are seen as being ‘good’ for their family and their own health. Referring to the Western literature, ethical concerns focus on human rights, the Western concept of ethical consumption is based on the premise that consumers are ‘doing well’ themselves, and they are able to offer some help to others in some way. Chinese consumers’ ethical concerns in terms of human rights can perhaps be interpreted as their concern for ‘consumer welfare’. The issue here is that they and their family members are protected from potential hazards in consumption – and that through this wider societal issues are addressed.

In general terms, given the issues presented above, the cultural values and virtues highlighted by Chinese consumers suggest that Confucianism has the capacity to be adopted as the ‘treatment’ for China’s moral decay and that there is scope for its application as a moral framework to re-establish moral discourses in China.
6.3.3 Little implications for political aspects

Following the natural flow of the study, I have already entered into a reflection on political aspects – which were unexpected from my perspective. From the study of ethical consumption there are two issues, one direct and one indirect, in relation to the current political system in China. Direct relevance can be seen from Chinese consumer’s expression of ‘anti-made in Japan’. Such expression shares similarity with ethical slogans from the West such as ‘made in the USA’, ‘buy America’, ‘anti-made in China’. Such expressions are often associated with a sense of patriotism (see chapter 5 section 5.5.2 for a detailed discussion of this concern).

The indirect political relevance is closely associated with the Western concept of ‘empowerment’. The Western notion of consumer empowerment, apart from empowering consumers to make a difference to their consumption behaviour, also suggests the engagement of a ‘citizen consumer’. Here the notion is that citizens are consumers of public services and citizen consumers are created when governments encourage citizens to bring ‘a consumer mentality to their relations with government, judging state services much like other purchased goods, by the personal benefit they derive from them’ (Cohen, 2001). In a similar fashion, ethical consumption is interpreted as ‘dollar voting’ (Giesler, Markus; Veresiu, Ela, 2014). The notion here is that ‘individuals have a voice and that each vote has equal weight – and that this leads to change – as such ‘voters’ shape their context by exercising their understandings as choice as demonstrated in government elections and referendums in the UK.

However, from Chinese consumer responses, it can be seen that the idea of consumer empowerment and a citizen consumer do not appear to have much worth. On the one hand, the Chinese government has not shown signs of encouraging such a notion – applying citizen power to voting as the West does; on the other hand, Chinese consumers are themselves inculcated with the idea of ‘Lao baixing’ and do not seem to have much desire for ‘empowerment’- in the sense of making social impact via consumption, nor in a political sense. In many of the cases, Chinese consumers tend to look at the powerful Communist Party of China – which runs the country as the
source of authority and power – as ‘the’ decision maker. This position is not
unique to the Communist Party – the notion of the Lao baixing is one that is
older and was established in previous social and political structures. It has
however persisted and has perhaps found fertile ground in the precepts of
the Communist Party.

It became evident that the political system in China does not offer as much
space as the Western political system does, the different voting system at
play can be viewed as a direct symbol of the extent to which an individual
citizen can exercise their citizen power. When it comes to exercising power,
Chinese consumers are in a very different position compared to those in the
West. The fixed political system and its election method reflect the level of
power that the individual citizen holds. From a different perspective, Chinese
society is built on an invisible hierarchy (based a Confucian precept perhaps)
where the governor and the citizen are not equal, and the citizen should be
obedient to the governor, this matches well the identity of the ‘Lao baixing’.

As Chinese consumers have inherited the identity of ‘Lao baixing’, they have
tendency to look to the powerful government and wait for it to treat the
problems in the Chinese consumption system. Food safety is one of the most
severe problems and there is a need for a strong force at the country’s
government level to establish legislation and laws to address the food safety
problem. In other areas, such as free-range and organic produce, there is a
need to enforce the legislation; the Chinese government needs to stop
‘opening one eye and closing the other’ and being tolerant to fraudulent
business activities in the Chinese market; there is an need for regulations
and standardization at the macro level that will help to lead to the possibility
of trustworthiness in the Chinese market system.

6.4 Ethical consumption: reflections on the Western literature

According to Newton’s third law, when one body exerts a force on a second
body, the second body simultaneously exerts a force equal in magnitude and
opposite in direction on the first body (Hellingman, 1992). Initially, when
conducting the study of ethical consumption, my full intention was to
‘examine’ this Western concept in China, without any expectations that a
study in a Chinese context could have any implications on the Western literature. Newton’s third law is not limited to within a physics classroom; it also has wider implications, in that it suggests that all forces are interactions between different bodies (Resnick & Halliday, 1977). The study findings concerning ethical consumption among the Chinese consumers can be viewed as ‘reaction force’ (or counter force) to the action force – the Western concept of ethical consumption. This reaction offers feedback and reflections on the Western theoretical frameworks and studies that have approached the subject of ethical consumption.

6.4.1 Re-appraisal of the Western concept of ethical consumption
From the very beginning until its culmination, the key concept of this study has been “ethical consumption”. My perception of this concept has altered; it can be summarized as moving from ‘blind pursuit’ to ‘clam appreciation’ to ‘critical view. As a researcher, this changing sensitivity mirrors my growing understanding of the concept: from originally intending to transplant the concept of ethical consumption from the West to China directly; to a new conception of leaving the Western concept to one side and seeking to understand the meaning of ethical consumption within the Chinese context; at the end of the journey I find I have developed a ‘critical view’ towards the concept of ethical consumption at a broader more abstract level.

‘Critical’ here does not mean simply expressing adverse or disapproving comments or judgements (Oxford online dictionaries, 2016). Being a descendent of Confucianism, critical views are not greatly encouraged as ‘obedience’ and ‘to respect order’ were emphasized in the constitution of a Confucian society. I was surprised when ‘the door of critical perception’ in relation to the concept of ethical consumption opened for me. It was something far beyond my previous imagination. In actuality, this moment did not occur until the final stage of my study. It was inspired by a casual conversation: a friend of mine (in China) knowing my study subject, told me purposely that she had lately taken to shopping in the ‘Safe Food Store’ (安 全食品商店). Initially, I thought it was a joke, but then she sent me a photo of the store to prove so. From the photo, it clearly shows the store’s name –
‘Safe Food’. I did not know how to describe my feelings. It was somewhat ironic given the current food safety problems in China that an operator had created the idea of opening a store called ‘Safe Food Store’ to justify the safety and quality of its products. It also underscores that safe food is what is actually lacked, and what is seemingly being offered. In a way, the name of the store is trying to meet Chinese consumers’ needs and wants. Such logic also seems evident in the Western concept of ethical consumption, the creation of this concept, in a way, reflects that there is a supposed lack of ethics in consumption.

Chinese consumers questioned that if all the products were ‘ethically’ made, what would be the need to advocate the concept of ethical consumption. Such view can be traced back to an old Chinese folk story called ‘there are no 300 silver tales hidden here’ (此地无银三百两). The story unfolds as follows: once upon a time, a man got 300 sliver tales and he decided to hide them somewhere safe. After serious consideration, he buried the silver under the earth. Yet he was still worried, he was constantly thinking if someone knew they will steal his treasure. So he came up with another idea, he wrote a poster next to where the silver was buried and it said: there are no 300 silver tales hidden here. That way, he thought, no one will ever know.

This ancient Chinese folk story echoes Chinese consumers’ question above on the concept of ethical consumption, it also mirrors to some extent Western marketing practice. For instance, in 2014, the BBC aired a documentary that detailed what was perceived as an industrial conspiracy – the life span of light bulb. It revealed that a light bulb’s life span had been purposely shortened since 1920s, so that consumers are constantly forced into purchasing new light bulb, thus ensuring manufacturing stability. Initially, manufacturers strived to produce long life bulbs. In 1881, Thomas Edison’s first commercial bulb lasted 15,000 hours. By 1924, the advertisements of light bulb proudly claimed they lasted 2,500 hours. However, then the major manufacturers within lighting industry agreed ‘the average life of lamps for general lighting service must not be guaranteed, published or offered for another value than 1000 hours’. As an outcome, by the 1940, the light bulb’s
life span was reduced to 1,000 hours. The ‘light bulb conspiracy’ reflects how planned obsolescence impacts consumers’ lives and has defined our economy structure since 1920s - simply based on the logic that if consumers do not purchase the economy will not grow.

The light bulb conspiracy can also be viewed as a symbol of the problems of a contemporary consumerist society, the concept of ethical consumption does not necessarily solve this problem. It requires something bigger and more fundamental to be changed – the economic structure and the political system for instance. The Western concept of ethical consumption largely emphasizes an individual consumers’ responsibilities in consumption; the Chinese consumers’ perceptive is a reminder that the concept of ethical consumption cannot be solely achieved by individual consumers alone, there is a need for the collaboration of business, other originations and government; all the participating elements in the marketing system need to co-operate and only then can a sense of harmony be achieved – a genuine sense of ethical consumption.

In addition, the Western concept of ethical concept, has an exclusive focus on purchasing choices, which in essence, is still encouraging purchasing; Chinese consumers’ perspectives on ethical consumption widen the scope of ethical consumption to consider the necessity of consumption or less consumption, to practice ethical consumption choices in line with pre- and post-consumption practice as a process may help the contribute an ethical consumption as a life habit in the overall everyday experiences of consumers.

The existing focus of ethical consumption in the Western literature is about buying and decision making in consumption – dominated by the choice of goods. Chinese traditional cultural values in the form of Confucianism speaking through the Chinese consumers, conveys the importance of intrinsic good – the goodness from the exercising of virtues, rather than from the external choices of goods. This creates a conversation with the Western concept of ethical consumption: there is a need to go beyond the surface of ethical concerns and ethical choices, to revisit the virtues and morality in consumption. As the creation of the concept of ethical consumption is not
only reflective of supposed issues in the marketing system; but it can also be
associated with wider issues in society, and mirrors some of the key
problems in consumerist driven society, for example, the excessive
consumption habits that modern consumers may have developed.

The study of ethical consumption should not be separated from
understanding the overall consumption picture; similarly, ethical consumption
cannot be separated from morality as human beings. It is important to
acknowledge the connection of consumers’ consumption activities with the
grand story of being humans, living-in-the-world. To illustrate this point
further, let us borrow from the Ethical Consumer Magazine once more; as
already discussed this magazine offers wide range of information on different
companies and products ranges, striving to offer consumers a guide to find
the most ‘ethical’ choices. However, learning about all the companies and
their products’ ethics rating can be a time consuming project. This is not to
suggest that it is impossible for a committed consumer to engage with all the
information, it is rather to suggest that such efforts may not make
consumption truly ‘ethical’. What we truly need as ‘ethical consumption’ is
that our time should not be confined to concerns of what to buy, there is
need to rediscover the true vocation of ‘ethical consumption’, which is to
serve the wider longer-term interests of society – human flourishing.

6.4.2 Reflection on the ethical consumption theoretical framework
In the marketing tradition, the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) by Ajzen
and Fisbien (1980), as the literature review discussed, is regarded as a
“heavy weight champion”. As such it has been the dominant theory over the
past few decades applied in studying ethical consumption behaviour, as well
as other aspects of consumer behaviour. Studies in the Western literature
applying TPB as the theoretical framework commonly lead to a similar
conclusion: an attitude-behaviour gap, a purchasing gap, or 30:3 phenomena.
There is no exception in the study conducted by Professor Deng (2014) in
China, where his study based on the TPB lead to similar conclusions. Such
studies’ findings point to the same question: why do consumers not ‘walk
their talk’? As a consequence, more studies are encouraged that search for
methods and factors to address this gap, as if such a gap clearly exists and
potentially something can be done to bridge it. However, researchers focusing on bridging this gap often forget to question the idea itself. How worthy is the question and if it is possible (or even desirable) to bridge such a gap at all?

Studies that have claimed gaps, such as that of attitude-behaviour, have mostly been based on the traditional linear models and, as noted above, that of the TPB in particular. The common feature of those studies is that they have the tendency to treat consumer behaviour in a vacuum, and assume consumers always make rational decisions. Based on such logic, an orthodoxy has emerged that in order to encourage more ethical consumption behaviour, we have to work to change consumers’ beliefs, values, and attitudes. However, this study’s results suggest such an assumption is ineffective in studying consumers’ ethical consumption behaviour, as consumers do not always follow such logic to make consumption choices and their understandings of ethical consumption can be various, different and even contradictory. The importance of the context in which consumers live also has been highlighted as having a significant influence on their understandings of ethics in consumption and its related activities – and this underscores the need to consider and integrate wider sociocultural and institutional factors. This study’s result suggests that traditional linear models and TPB models are not sufficient to explore this complex consumption behaviour and there is a need to reconsider the theoretical framework in ethical consumption studies.

The literature review chapter introduced an alternative logic – the recursive model from social theory. Compared with traditional linear models, the recursive model addresses the complex process of consumer behaviour, which may or may be not rational; it also considers how consumers’ internal mood and emotions impact them, as well as the importance of the external context. As the reclusive model demonstrates, the situation is complicated: on the one hand, it contains to the traditional logic that encompasses the connection between values-attitude-intention-behaviour; on the other hand, it acknowledges that behaviour in turn impacts intention, attitude and values. In the context of understanding consumer behaviour in such a logic, consumers
are not expected to make rational decisions at all times, and such a model acknowledges the external environment’s influence, such as the cultural context and specific situations, as well as emotional effects (e.g. emotions effects can be reflected in Chinese consumers’ affection for family members and their frustration, even anger, with food safety issues) on the consumer’s behaviour process.

This study’s findings reflect the complexities in ethical consumption, and here a recursive model possibly has more capacity to address these complexities and offers a more holistic and considered framework. For instance, how do consumers’ values impact their beliefs and intentions – Chinese consumers under the influences of a Confucian moral vision demonstrate a very different understanding of ‘ethical consumption’. How do the external influences impact consumers’ perceptions – the current Chinese social conditions and its impact on Chinese consumers’ understandings is evident in issues such as that of trustworthiness in Chinese market. What is the role of information and knowledge in ethical consumption – as Chinese consumers’ responses to ‘animal welfare’ illustrated, it is not that there is ignorance, simply that the approach to framing responses to this issues is entirely different. What are consumers’ mood and emotion – as the negative impacts of ‘the 2008 food incident’ on Chinese consumers’ emotions and perceptions suggest – these are both intense and enduring. All these elements have relevance in Chinese consumers’ understandings of the notion of ethical consumption, although some were addressed more than the others. It can be concluded that the logic of the recursive model provides a more suitable theoretical base, compared with the traditional TPB, from which to understand the complexity of consumption behaviour.
Figure 11 A recursive model/logic in understating consumer behaviour

based on a recursive model of social action (adapted from Devinney et al., 2010, p.51)

The figure above - a recursive model in understanding consumption behaviour – is based on the current study’s findings and adapted from the recursive model of social action suggested by Devinney et al., (2010, p.51). This recursive model could be useful in the future research as a basis for exploring and understanding consumer behaviour/ethical consumption behaviour in a Chinese context, as well as other cultural contexts. My recommendations for future research is that instead of searching for mechanisms to bridge the infamous ‘attitude–behaviour gap’ in ethical consumption, researchers are encouraged to look beyond the logic of traditional liner model and TPB, to embrace the possibilities that a recursive model and logic might bring to the understanding of consumer behaviours.

However, this is not to suggest that future research into ‘consumption and ethical consumption’ must adopt a model such as the recursive model. The
purpose of suggesting this model rests on two intentions: firstly, to offer an alternative to TPB, one which has greater capacity to comprehend real life situations and external influences; secondly, as a symbol to challenge the traditional orthodoxy of studying consumer behaviours using TPB and similar logics. Future researchers are encouraged to borrow the logics from the recursive model, as it is still in a relatively early stage of development and has not been commonly adopted in studying consumers’ (ethical) consumption behaviours. In essence, the introduction of the recursive model has the wider implication that researchers should not be limited to a linear model or to a few components of a model when studying consumers' (ethical) consumption behaviours, but rather be able to locate the study within the specific context and have the capacity to appreciate that consumer actions are sophisticated and complex. This study suggests that any attempt to research within a rigid model would not be effective in gaining insight into consumers’ behaviour and consumption worlds.

Most importantly, it is the appreciation of consumers’ (ethical) consumption behaviour as part of their daily consumption life. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of how the meanings of ethical consumption are constructed, there is a need to attach such understanding to its moral foundations. And the quest for moral foundations should not be limited by a rule-and-code focused lens; a virtue-based approach, or virtue ethics approach, has shed an important new light on the study of ethical consumption behaviours.

6.4.3 Reflection on research approach
This study’s findings clearly identify that the Western concept of ethical consumption does not resonate well among Chinese consumers. There is a major lack of information about the Western concept of ethical consumption in China. This can be seen from data in chapter 4, when Chinese consumers were faced with such concepts and they gave various responses. This suggests that it is ineffective to transplant the Western concept of ethical consumption directly into the Chinese context. Future studies into ethical consumption should consider of if it is suitable to directly transplant the Western concept of ethical consumption without firstly knowing if such a concept is (well) understood and accepted by consumers?
The ‘inappropriateness’ of the Western concept of ethical consumption in the Chinese context also suggests that the current ethical consumption literature presents a Western dominant perspective. The meanings of ethical consumption can be different in different social contexts, depending on the political, culture and social-economic situation of that environment. Studying ethical consumption without firstly understanding the meaning of ethical consumption should be avoided. This study’s findings offer a different perspective of the concept of ethical consumption: Chinese consumers’ interpretation of the meaning of the concept, which is one of its contributions to the body of knowledge on ethical consumption. The findings also suggest that future research into ethical consumption elsewhere in the world should also be encouraged to add further perspectives to existing understandings of ethical consumption.

When reading publications in the West, for example, the *Ethical Consumer Magazine*, it is worth noting that such publications do not necessarily make the same sense to the consumers in a non-Western context. Sometimes the most recognizable logos in the West in such as ‘fair trade’ can be completely alien to consumers from a different cultural context such as China. It is also worth considering how to communicate the sense of ‘ethics’ in consumption, to not only the consumers in the West, but also elsewhere in the world. When I first came to study in the UK in 2008, one of the most frequently asked question was ‘what was your biggest culture shock in UK?’ My answers used to as follow ‘the British way of passing time, drinking pints in the pubs and chatting away’. But now, I suppose the biggest the culture shock is the outcome from my study of the meanings of ethical consumption and how ‘ethics’ are perceived in different consumption environment.

During the research journey, one story come to my mind from time to time, it is the story of ‘the blind men and an elephant’ - a story of a group of blind men (or men in the dark) who touch an elephant to learn what it is like. Each one feels differently because they each touched a different part of the elephant; they then compare notes and learn that they are in complete disagreement (Gardner, 1995). This story has been widely diffused and it also has implications in understanding the ethics of consumption. Each
cultural context contributes to the comparison of notes; thus by encouraging future studies in different cultural and specific contexts this could lead to a more holistic view of the essence of the phenomenon of consumption and the morality embedded in it.

Much of the discourse with Chinese consumers in this study was around ordinary consumption activities, their ordinary consumption stories and experiences offer channels to understand what ‘ethical consumption’ means to them. This suggests the quest for understanding the ‘ethics of consumption’ should not be limited within the scope of ethical concerns as the existing literature defines them, there is need to widen the scope of study context and that it is worth giving consideration to the overall consumption context. In particular, it is key to consider that an understanding of the ethics of consumption could be gained from consumers’ everyday ordinary consumption activities.

This further suggests that future research into ethical consumption is encouraged to be creative and explorative in understanding the meanings of ethical consumption and how meanings are constructed. In other words, this study’s result encourages a shift in study approach in ethical consumption studies. Instead of following the traditional positivistic quantitative research approach, which inevitably lead to the identification of a ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ in ethical consumption, future research is encouraged to embrace a non-positivist approach, that offers more freedom and flexibility for the further exploration of the meanings of the concept of ethical consumption in context, and so further enhances the understandings of the notion of ethical consumption.

6.5 Re-evaluation of the moral foundations
An earlier section – the reappraisal of the concept of ethical consumption - reveals the limitation of this concept and points to seeking for ‘something beyond’. In order to gain accesses to this ‘something beyond’, it is necessary to refer back to the fundamental moral foundations of consumption ethics. The literature review chapter reveals the moral foundation of the Western concept of ethical consumption is mainly based on a deontological moral
position, which prioritizes a ‘principle based’ moral view, as such the principles laid by consumer activists greatly influenced the concept of Western ethical consumption. The Chinese consumers offer a very different moral approach, which is influenced by a Confucian moral vision. The differentiation between the two moral foundations offers reflections on the moral foundation in consumption ethics.

6.5.1 Reflections on moral philosophies
This study’s approach reflects the usefulness of virtue ethics, which respects individual consumers’ habits and daily practice and pays attention to consumers’ motivation for ordinary consumption. It is this capacity of virtue ethics that enables this study to draw the meanings of ethical consumption from Chinese consumers’ ordinary consumption practice. Both consequentialism and deontology tend to neglect consumers’ motivation in consumption and overly idealize consumers’ consumption behaviour (Barnett et al., 2005). For instance, the family is at the centre of Chinese consumers’ concerns in their consumption. By applying the rigid approaches of consequentialism and deontology, the impression might be of selfish Chinese consumers and thus this would largely led to the ignoring of the centrality of family in Chinese cultural practices at large and its impact on Chinese consumers understanding of ethical consumption.

This study’s findings also suggest that virtue ethics is a useful moral philosophy in understanding the concept of ethical consumption among Chinese consumers. For example, it helps to explain Chinese consumers ‘compassion’ where both the outcomes-based consequentialism and principles-based deontology failed to provide such. For example, when faced with the situation where ‘conventional eggs’ are presented as being ‘free-range’, Chinese consumers were quite tolerant with comments such as ‘at least, its real eggs’, they were able to understand the reason for such activities. As they live in that environment, they have a deep understanding of the reason why people are engaging in such a ‘deception’. Such understanding can be gained from a virtue theory perspective, which is able to acknowledge that specific context and environment.
Another example is Chinese consumers’ view towards child labour, where both consequentialism and deontology again fail to provide sensible answers. Chinese consumers did not appear to express much compassion or sympathy towards child labour, they tended rather to prioritize their family members’ welfare first in negotiating their concerns within the reality and current constraints in China. This however, is not to suggest that Chinese consumers have no sympathy at all, but it shows in a situation such as practicing compassion towards child labour in consumption practices, such reasoning does not make much sense to Chinese consumers in current Chinese society (due to elements such as societal atmosphere, regulations and law, family centred cultural values etc.). It reflects that consumption is somewhat a negotiation between consumers’ moral positions and practical context. A virtues-based moral approach or virtue ethics provides the flexibility and space that enables an appreciation of the context where consumers live and their responses towards ethical issues such as child labour, rather than placing one rule or one outcome on those consumers.

This further underscores the importance of cultural impacts in ethical consumption studies. Chinese consumers’ understanding of ethical consumption largely depends on the specific cultural context they live in. This is consistent with virtue ethics view in terms of the importance of the cultural and social context. Therefore, it helps to understand consumers in relation to ethical consumption in a more sophisticated context, rather than an idealized context based on rigid principles or outcomes. In the context of China, future research is encouraged to extend the current findings further, by paying close attention to traditional Chinese cultural value such as Confucian philosophy and its impact on Chinese consumers’ understandings of the ethics of consumption, as well as the concept of ethical consumption. Such reflection also helps elicit the moral framework in the West, we can learn that solely relying on principles or outcomes orientated approach is not adequate in achieving a deep understanding of consumers and dealing with their real life consumption issues. Thus, virtue ethics is recommended in studying ethical consumption in a Western context, to address the issues where deontology and consequentialism failed to achieve.
6.5.2 An ethical consumer as ‘junzi’

‘Ethical consumer’ as a title, or an identity, has been codified in the Western literature, I did not give much thought to this at the early stages of the study. There is a title ‘junzi’ from the Confucian moral vision; it sets out the exemplary figure, a person with good character and moral integrity. The figure of ‘junzi’ can be useful in understanding the ‘ethics of consumption’ by comparing and contrasting it with that of the Western ‘ethical consumer’.

Firstly, ‘ethical consumer’, as a title, differentiates the holder from other consumers, in a similar fashion to the label of middle class as a differentiator. ‘Ethical consumer’ can then be adopted as badge from consumers’ consumption activities – purchasing ‘ethical’ alternatives. In this case, the logic of this ‘ethical’ justification works from ‘the external’ to ‘the internal’ - from certain purchasing choices to demonstrate the goodness of the consumer.

The notion of ‘junzi’ from Confucianism is an exemplary person of good character and moral integrity, junzi can be viewed as the ideal person who possesses the desired virtues (e.g. ren, yi, cheng-xin). To Confucius, junzi sustained the functions of government and social stratification through their intrinsic goodness - ethical values. Compared with ‘ethical consumer’, the notion of junzi demonstrates a reversed approach of ‘being good’. Its emphasis is on the intrinsic good of the individual, for as Confucius highlights: if the intrinsic good is not established in the first place, the concerns for external good would not in actually ‘be good’. The cardinal principles of ren and yi both promote intrinsic good that constitute a good person.

In contrast to the notion of ethical consumer, where the sense of consumers’ identity is established through external channels - their selective consumption behaviour; the notion of junzi is ‘less readily’ claimed – it requires a lifelong exercise of intrinsic good that requires one practising virtues to improve oneself. From here, this refection points to the root of ethical consumption, is not a matter of consumers being puzzled by the literal meaning of ethical consumption, but rather requires that they truly mediate on the ‘ethical’ values that lead to a righteous human life. The goodness of a person/consumer should not be judged solely from their consumption.
choices; thus the basis for the usage of ‘ethical consumer’ should be re-considered.

6.6 Summary
This thesis told a story about a Chinese perspective of ethical consumption from two dimensions. Firstly, it revealed Chinese consumers’ responses towards the Western concept of ethical consumption and discussed their implications. Secondly, it described an authentic Chinese interpretation of the concept of ethical consumption based on the specific urban-rural-fringe context in this study. A different Chinese perspective has been added to the existing literature to open new possibilities and new channels to approach this concept. This thesis has provided a lens to look into Chinese consumers’ consumption life in relation to the concept of ethical consumption. It has also provided detailed descriptions and vivid stories about Chinese consumers’ consumption experiences.

In addition, this thesis also provides a response to the existing literature on ethical consumption, with a strong call for ethical consumption to be regarded as a perspective of ethics rather than simply as a strand of marketing. The concept of ethical consumption is based on the word ‘ethical’, which is closely based on ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’. The usage of the term ‘ethical consumption’ should be conceptually bound to ethics. Ethical consumption is more than a badge to wear in consumers’ everyday consumption but should be deeply embedded within every small consumption practice that come together to constitute ethical consumption habits, such as the virtues of thrift and humble, trustworthiness, humanness and righteousness, loving one’s family and extending this love to others. Chinese consumers’ ethical considerations demonstrated that their understandings of the meaning of ethical consumption are not based on a single virtue; in many cases, the meanings of ethical consumption are constructed based on a set of embedded virtues, or sometimes can be a negotiation of different virtues (e.g. the Nike trainers example).

This set of virtues, when exercised in Chinese consumers’ consumption life, is also faced with negotiation within the practical situation and context in
order to achieve a sense of balance and harmony. As such, the understandings of ethical consumption points to wider aspects - as a contemporary consumer, the questions are beyond what to purchase; but how to purchase and what are the motivations behind that purchasing? In addition, it also points to macro questions such as how our society and economy are formulated and how the marketing system is operated. There are many questions that the current thesis cannot offer a solution to, such as the dilemma between capitalist economic growth and living a simple and frugal life. It seems a there is constant wrestling between consumers and the tempting material world. I feel a good place to finish this thesis is to return to its staring point – the concept of ethical consumption.

There is one particular Chinese traditional idiom that I thought can be useful in paralleling the notion of ethical consumption. Its literal translation is: to give a man a fish; you have fed him for today; to teach a man to fish; and you have fed him for a lifetime. I cannot help thinking if the concept of ethical consumption is better symbolized as the ‘fish’ or ‘fishing’ in marketing practice? If the concept of ethical consumption only delivers messages about what to purchase, then it is more like ‘the fish’ as the choices of purchasing product A or B does not deal with the fundamental issues in ethical consumption – the values, virtues and ethics behind the consumption activities. Only when the notion of ethical consumption goes beyond the narrow scope of existing ethical concerns and is able to demonstrate its moral foundations – does it resemble ‘fishing’. The skills of fishing can be symbolized as the virtues embedded in human beings; the acknowledgment of the virtues is not only reflected in consumers’ consumption behaviour, but also from their wider daily activities – which in total constitutes the true vocation of the notion of ethical consumption.

To close this thesis, I would like to borrow one of the Confucian teachings: Ren means ‘humanity’; the harmonious combination of the two is called the way. (Mencius, 7B: 16)
Epilogue

A simple purpose

In the writing of the thesis, there was one purpose that runs through the whole research journey. And this purpose has become the most meaningful ‘mantra’ that motivates me and keeps me on track. This purposefulness helps me cultivate a mindful state of being - being more aware of the present, my surroundings, and this mindfulness then helps my thoughts 'still' and enables me to consider issues and create action plans that serve the research purpose.

This purpose, initially, simply can be described as the research aim of this PhD thesis; later on, it has been exercised to my wider life activities. If the research purpose can be illustrated as a line, the series of actions to serve the research purpose, would form a series of zig-zags: constantly moving away and coming back to the purpose. When addressing the practice of serving the research purpose, the five 'Ws' play an important role. These Ws are: who, when, where, what and why. I have used these five 'W' questions, to ask myself and articulate specific queries that help to generate action guidance, in particular, at those points where I became 'stuck'. Through the application of five 'Ws' in my research and wider life activities, I have concluded that there is a shared theme in all the seemingly different activities I undertake: to see, to listen, to experience; and most importantly - to learn. Learning from others and experiences, can be viewed as the ultimate purpose to me. As one of the Confucian teachings says: "when I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them." (Analects, Book VII: Shu R, chapter 2. 子曰: “三人行，必有我師焉。擇其善者而從之，其不善者而改之。")

Learning as threshold experiences

Approaching to the final stage of my thesis, I luckily attended one of the workshops organized by the academic development unit in my University.
Unlike other workshops I had attended previously, this one focused on certain aspects of research approach or skill. Dr. Ray Land delivered this workshop, it was primarily an overview on learning and introducing the threshold concept in learning processes; it was somewhat revelatory for me. This two-hour workshop opened a new door; the notion of thresholds in learning deeply resonates with my personal learning process. Firstly, I am attracted to the idea of applying the notion of thresholds in learning processes, as it vividly reflected my ‘zig-zag’ learning process.

One of the key aspects in threshold learning theory is called ‘troublesome knowledge and let go’. Dr. Land said that it is difficult to let (the knowledge we knew) go. This deeply touched me: the knowledge we learn becomes part of our identity and part of us. To let it go means deconstruction of the self and it can be extremely painful; and the majority do not like being in the state of pain. Like many other learners, I had experienced such pain in the research process; in particular, the period before the actual turning point of the research occurred.

The early stage of my research was entirely based on the premise: ethical consumption is a good (and ethical) concept; this concept received considerable attention in the West, so this should happen in China and the attitude-behaviour gap in ethical consumption should be bridged. Reviewing my learning process, my previous assumptions can be referred to ‘troublesome knowledge’. That troublesome knowledge can be viewed as ‘mental blocks’ according to Dr. Land. This is also closely related to another concept of ‘liminality’ meaning being at a threshold of transformation from one state into another; where being at the threshold suggests an element of being ‘stuck’ – or at least not having transformed.

Another aspect of threshold learning theory is the notion of the ‘irreversible’, this particular experience can be found from my breakthrough moment in the research – where I realised that the Western notion of ethical consumption is not ‘appropriate’ to the Chinese consumer. Such realization, is itself like passing through a threshold, where my perception of the research topic entered a new conceptual space, as my prologue explained, such a shift can
be found in the reformation of the research questions and objectives. Indeed, such a learning process is irreversible, as it leads to a new learning space.

Each time I passed one ‘threshold’ and entered a new space, the moment of passing the threshold was almost like an ‘aha’ moment. I then recognized that the relative long period of being stuck, wrestling and struggling was the space in between each threshold - it was not something bad, but simply a part of the learning process. We pass through one threshold after another; yet we do not see the final one – that is what the threshold learning theory suggests: there is no final threshold.

Reappraisal my ‘Chinese-ness’
One of the most important ‘harvests’ from this research journey is that it has helped me reappraise my origins and the culture that has nourished me. By reviewing key virtues of Confucianism this study provided me with the opportunity to (re)engage with Confucius’ teachings and Chinese traditional cultural value systems for the first time. It was interesting that I read *Analects* in English then reverted to the Chinese original. In particular, it was interesting to observe the translation between English and Chinese.

It was undeniable that Confucian teachings were embedded in my family education and my primary and secondary education in China, but I was not aware of it. However, study in the UK offered me the freedom to study Confucianism, not only from a Chinese perspective, but also from a Western perspective, by reading studies on Confucianism in both Chinese and English. Thus, helping me to develop a more comprehensive and systematic understanding of my cultural heritage.

This learning process has helped me understand my cultural value further; it has also enabled me to appreciate my family culture even more; and to understand my family members better. I like the metaphor of fish and water, and often use this to illustrate my cultural experiences. As a fish, only when I was taken out of ‘Chinese environment’ and exposed to a ‘British environment’, did such a change help me to experience the differences and similarities in the different environments – thus, it enables me to be able to
reappraise Chinese cultural values from a new perspective. This sense of understanding – I call it my Chinese-ness, that this learning process has offered me – is an invaluable realisation.

Imagination in the research process
Through this research journey, I realised that imagination and research do not conflict, and they are complimentary. Imagination was an important element in my research, for example, writing the introduction of the thesis, while imagining the conclusion. A strong desire and motivation to finish the thesis flowed from this imagining. In a way, the role of imagination also helps to serve the ‘purpose’ of research.

In writing of my literature review, imagination was particularly useful in creating an imaginative conversation between Confucius and the Western concept of ethical consumption. Form the imaginative conversation; it helped me grasp the difference between Chinese and the Western moral sources. Data analysis also involved imagination. In a way, the data analysis almost like playing with Lego, having a great numbers of Lego blocks available but no blueprint to follow for construction. It then required imagination by looking at the different colours and shapes of cubes – to construct a meaningful and useful landscape.

Personal reflections on consumption
My study on ethical consumption has certainly impacted on my personal consumption habits. It has brought a positive change I feel: I have reduced my consumption level, spending less time and money in consumption activities, and I have also started to appreciate that which was unable to appreciate in the past, such as the merits of old and repaired items. Consuming moderately, thriftily and humbly - these values have stayed with me. Although my love for fashion remains, I have made a decision to wrestle with my tempting ‘consumption force’. One of the verses in the Scripture also inspires me: life is more than food, and the body is more than cloth (Luke
12:23). I often use this verse to remind myself whenever I have growing desire for unnecessary trainers and clothing.
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292


294


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296


Appendix 1. Street sellers in an urban-rural-fringe context

1: Buying and selling vegetables around the neighbourhood

2. A young man and his pineapple business
3. A lady and her strawberry business

4. Marinated duck eggs on sale
5. A family business next to the road

6. A local flower seller playing the flute by his ‘stall’
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研究课题：从消费者层面去理解，是什么因素阻止了道德消费在中国的发展？

座谈会组织者：霍岩，在读博士生，格鲁斯特大学
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aqaua@live.cn

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座谈会组织者：霍岩

日期：2013-09-08
尊敬的各位 您好，

我叫霍岩，目前是一名在读博士生，开展本次座谈会的目的是为了我的博士论文收集资料，万分感谢您的支持和帮助。

我的研究课题是从消费者层面去理解，是什么因素阻止了道德消费在中国的发展？道德消费这个概念对大多数人来讲可能还比较陌生，其实这个概念就是‘环保消费’的一个延伸。环保消费，顾名思义，是指消费者消费的同时去考虑对环境的影响；而道德消费，不仅考虑消费对环境的影响，也会去考虑对于动物，以及人类自身的影响。

如果您对我的研究题目感兴趣，欢迎您参加到座谈会中。我们一起来深入探讨一下这个话题。

以下是关于此次座谈会的信息：

1 大家自由发言，座谈时间可能持续 1 小时左右。
2 座谈内容将会被录像，之后以文字形式记录下来，以便后期的分析整理。
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Appendix 3. Conference paper

Key factors impeding ethical consumption: an exploratory study in a Chinese context

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Abstract: This paper aims to offer an authentic understanding of ethical consumption in a Chinese context, via identifying the key factors that impede ethical consumption from Chinese consumers’ perspective, which contribute to understand the attitude behaviour gap in ethical consumption behaviour. This study applied an exploratory approach; four focus groups were conducted in Beijing, China. Factors emerging from focus group discussion are consumer’s lack of information, lack of ethical products availability, price sensitivity and consumer’s scepticism and cynicism towards consumption. Some of the findings are consistent with the existing Western literature; others are not. The study results highlight that the cultural differences are significant in understanding consumer’s ethical consumption behaviour. It also suggests that Chinese consumers’ understanding of ethical issues can be different from Western perspectives: therefore, it is worth to explore the meaning of ethical consumption and specific ethical concerns from Chinese consumers’ perspective in further research.

Key words: ethical consumption, key factors, inhibitors, Chinese consumers

1.0 CONTEXTUALISATION OF THE STUDY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid growth of economic and social transformation in China has resulted in unsustainable levels of resource usage and ecological degradation, driven by excessive market growth and consumption (Anderlini, 2010). Recently, issues such as air pollution in China’s major cities such as Beijing have brought such degradation into sharp relief. The need to balance sustainable development and economic growth is a forceful driver. When trying to develop such a rebalanced position, the concept of ethical consumption may be helpful. It is closely associated with sustainability issues, such as environmental concerns, animal welfare and human rights (Harrison et al., 2005). Thus, ethical consumption plays a significant role in balancing sustainability, consumption and economic growth in China’s sustainable development.

Ethical consumption is still a relative new area in the marketing literature that has drawn increasing attention in the past three decades (Harrison et al., 2005). Research on ethical consumption has been challenged by the ‘attitude behaviour gap’, whereby consumers stated preferences rarely translate into actual purchasing (Auger & Devinney, 2007; Carrington et al., 2010; Devinney et al., 2010). This attitude-behaviour gap is still poorly understood, yet few studies have explored the factors responsible for this gap (Bray et al., 2010). Researchers such as Bray, John and Kilburn (2010) conducted the first focused study on discovering the key factors impeding ethical consumption in a UK context. Their study findings suggested seven factors including price sensitivity, personal experience, ethical obligation, lack of information, quality perception, cynicism and inertia.
Among the limited amount of studies seeking a better understanding of the factors responsible for the attitude-behaviour gap, almost all of these studies have been conducted from a Western perspective. What are the key factors (inhibitors) shaping Chinese consumer's ethical consumption behaviour that remain underexplored. The Existing literature suggests that studying ethical choice without explicitly considering cultural context is largely unrealistic (Belk et al., 2005). Although ethics are a universal human trait, standards that guide ethicality differ from society to society (Abdur & Hwee, 2002). Each society has its own form of government, socio-economic and legal conditions, values, standards of moral and ethical behaviour and priorities. These diverse factors work differently in different societies (Abdur & Hwee, 2002). This study, therefore, aims to elicit the key factors impeding ethical consumption behaviour amongst Chinese consumers.

2.0 METHODOLOGY
Focus group technique was adopted to capture the key factors inhibiting Chinese consumers’ ethical consumption in this study. As it suits this study’s exploratory nature and allows exploring multiple factors through the dynamic focus group discussions (Morgan, 1988). Also, this method has been successfully employed elsewhere to study consumer behaviour in ethical consumption context (Bray et al., 2010; Nicholls & Lee, 2006, Co-operative Bank’s Report, 2004).

A snowball sampling method was adopted. Four focus groups were conducted in Beijing, China over three weeks. Each focus group consists of four to five participants. It was necessary to use this small group size due to the sensitive nature of this subject, and to minimize the potential for social desirability bias (Falconer, 1976). Participants were native mainland Chinese selected from different occupation, socio-economic spectrums and different age groups to increase the possibility of variety in participants for the focus groups. Each group discussion was recorded by a video camera and followed by full transpiration. The transcript was firstly done in Chinese to maintain the originality and the richness of the group conversation. The long table analysis method (Krueger, 2013) was used to organize and map the data; and the content analysis method was applied to assist the data analysis.

3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
The key factors impeding ethical consumption behaviour in China emerging from the focus group discussion are consumer’s lack of information, lack of ethical products availability, price sensitivity, a low level of consumer perceived effectiveness and consumer’s scepticism and cynicism towards consumption. Each factor is discussed in more details below.

3.1 Lack of Information
The first impeding factor emerged from the focus groups is that Chinese consumers lack relevant information and knowledge about ethical issues in consumption. Focus group participants suggested that they were neither familiar with the concept nor the practice of ethical consumption. For example, ‘what does ethical consumption mean?’(G1, Participant 1); ‘I have never noticed the fair trade logo. What is it?.. (G1, participant 3); ‘if there is more relevant advisement or programmes on TV, it might be different, I have never heard about ethical consumption before… (G3, participant 3);’I don’t think there is enough publicity (about ethical consumption), there is not much relevant on TV…(G1, Participant 1)… there is not enough reporting and advertising about it, if there were more (reporting about it), it might be different… (G2, Participant 1)’ The comments from participants show that the public domain in China doesn't contain much information relevant to ethical consumption; therefore, most of the participants suggested that they did not have enough knowledge about it.

When participants were asked whether they care about ‘no animal test products, none of them had heard it; one participant understood it in a very different way compared with established western meanings. For instance, participants said ‘I have never heard the 'no animal text' before…(all participants from G1, G2, G3, G4), ‘Does that means it’s safe or not safe? Like the medicine test, for instance, if it’s tested on animal, it will list the possible side
effects... animal tested products should be safer for me (G3, Participant 2) "No animal test? Never heard about it... (G3, Participant 1, 2, 3) "... it's a very new thing to me, haven't heard of it before. Our attention is more focused on the quality..." (G4, Participant 1)... "I have never seen the logo on any product previously..." (G3, Participant 1, 2, 3)"

The literature suggests that consumers are less likely to make ethical purchase when they lack relevant information and knowledge about ethical issues in consumption (Bray et al., 2010); consumers need to be fully informed to make effective purchasing decisions (Sproles et al., 1978). Due to the lack of information of ethical issues, this significantly reflected the lack of ethical consideration in Chinese consumer's consumption behaviour. It can be seen from the above focus group participant's comments; they are either do not care about 'no animal test' or believe that having products based on animals tests for safety purpose is 'ethical'. The Chinese consumers' attitude of 'animal test is ethical', in fact, it influenced by the Chinese government legislation about personal care products. International brands such as Esteem Lauder, Mary Kay and Avon have abandoned animal test for many years, but in order to sell their products in the mainland of Chinese market, they had to resume the animal test to match the Chinese legislation (Lin, 2013). This suggests that different government, legislation and standards can have strong influence on shaping consumers cognition, attitude and behaviour in ethical consumption; in addition, this highlighted that consumers perception of the meaning of ethical can be different depends on when and where they live.

3.2 Lack of Ethical Products Availability
The lack of ethical products availability appeared as another strong barrier to ethical consumption in China. With the stores and supermarkets lack of ethical products supply, it directly reduces the opportunities for consumer’s involvement in ethical consumption. As the focus groups participants suggest that ‘not many places from which you can buy organic food, the convenience store in our neighbourhood doesn't sell ethical products, it has to be a big supermarket’ (G1, Participant 2) ‘...but I don't enjoy purchase organic vegetables in supermarket, they don't have many kinds and they are not as fresh as the ones selling in free market.' (G3, Participant 2) ‘...ideally, I would like to purchase organic vegetables, but, I don't see anyone selling it in the morning open market.’ (G2, Participant 2) ‘...Whenever my grandson wants some snack, we buy from the nearby shop immediately, it's impossible for us to drive a long way to Wal-Mart to get some ethical snacks for kid' (G2, Participant 4)

Consumers will less likely get involved in ethical consumption if it requires more efforts such as travelling large distances (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). Lack of ethical products availability was also identified by previous study by Nicholls and Lee (2006) in a Western context; however this contradicted the study by Bray et al. (2010). According to Bray et al. (2010) research findings, the lack of ethical products is no longer a barrier in ethical consumption in England, as ethical products can be easily accesses in most supermarkets and stores nowadays. This suggests that whether the lack of ethical product availability is a barrier in ethical consumption is depending on when and where consumers live; it is perceived as a barrier in China now, but with the development and popularization of ethical products in the short future, this factor may naturally minimize like the Western market.

3.3 Price Sensitivity
Price sensitivity is perceived as another inhibitor to most focus group participants. Most of the participants commented on the higher price of ethical products, suggesting that price is an important aspect in Chinese consumer's purchase decision making. For example, ‘...fruits sellers recommend the organic banana to my mother, but it's too pricey. It's doubled the normal banana's price' (G1, participant 3) 'I would love to purchase organic vegetables, but its double the price, so I gave up...’ (G3, participant 1). Price sensitivity was also identified as one of the important impeding factors to ethical consumption in Western studies (e.g. Bray et al., 2010; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001).

However, there is another response to price sensitivity in terms of milk and dairy product purchasing from the focus groups. The lack of confidence in domestic milk due to 'poison milk incidents' in China's recent years has led some Chinese consumers to prefer ethical / organic milk, even though the price of these products are higher. This is reflected in some of
the comments made by participants who are parents. For example, ‘...I will definitely purchase organic milk no matter how much it costs, as long as it is pure natural milk’ (G4, participant 4) ‘I bought imported powdered milk for my child, even though it’s more expensive, it’s worth spending for my child, it doesn’t matter how much to spend on a child, you’ve only got this one ...’ (G3, participant 3). Chinese consumers seek safe dairy milk products by purchasing ethical / organic milk to ensure their children have safe milk; the desire for protection of their children’s health has overcome the price sensitivity in this case. This contrasting perception of price sensitivity among participants implies that the extent of price sensitivity depends on the products catalogue and the specific social context.

3.4 Consumer’s Scepticism and Cynicism towards Consumption

There is substantial evidence of a high degree of scepticism and cynicism surrounding consumption among Chinese consumers which has been highlighted by all groups of participants; evidence can be seen from the following statements: ‘although some box have organic label on them, but I’m not convinced of what it is really inside of the box...real organic or fake organic...cannot tell...’; ‘I am not sure the shoes they (company) promised to give to children will for sure be on the children’s feet...’ (G1, participant 3).

The food product safety problem is the most significant one emerging from the focus group discussion. Although the literature suggested the importance of quality perception in ethical consumption (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001), the food safety problem in China is very distinct and the problem almost occurs in every product range, such as pesticide residue on fruits and vegetables, fake products (fake eggs, fake meal), swill-cooked oil, poisoned milk powder, expired moon cakes and ‘black heart rice’, these incidents stand out as an abnormal phenomenon damaging Chinese consumers consumption experience. For example, ‘the pesticide residue makes me worry when purchasing fruits and vegetables, I admire people who live in the countryside and own some filed, so they can grow their own vegetables and fruits, that are the safest foods’ (G3, participant 4); ‘whenever I buy eggplants, I try to buy the one with worms’ holes on it, if it is safe to worms; it should be safe to me...what we can eat now? Nothing is safe nowadays!’ (G3, participant 1); ‘I use imported powdered milk for my child, although it costs more, I feel it is better and safer than the domestic made’ (G3, participant 2); ‘our domestic milk industry has problems every so often, this makes me nervous about it...’ (G2, participant 3).

This high degree of scepticism and cynicism towards consumption is not accidental, and there are underlying issues contributing to the consumer’s negative perception of products and company. One major contribution is that the negative incidents (e.g. food safety problems, corruption in Charity) kept occurring in Chinese society, and these negative news reports filled in the Chinese mass media. Thus, it highly impacted on consumer’s perception of trust toward products, companies and even public organizations. It became rather difficult for Chinese consumers to believe whatever the company’s claims were, as pointed out by one of the participants - We cannot even trust Red Cross, so who will trust the 361 degree (a sport brand) ..?' (G1, participant 1).

There are other concerns that also contribute to high degree of scepticism and cynicism towards consumption in China: Company’s lack of credibility and transparency. For example, ‘...merchants are like the monsters in the Journey to the west, they are very good at disguising themselves. Their start point is always to gain more profit...when they try to behave good, it’s just another selling point...’ (G1, participant 1); ‘Nowadays, all the closes are made from OEM factory, including the big brands, so it is impossible to know where and who produces the clothes, why bother to care...’ (G3, participant 3).

Figure 1 illustrates the consequences of food safety problems and consumer’s scepticism and cynicism. It can be seen that the whole cycle starting from food safety problems; which causes Chinese consumers lack of security in terms of consumption, leads to consumer’s cynicism and scepticism and also causes company’s lack of credibility, which in turn contributes to a high level of consumers’ scepticism and cynicism.
Consumers commonly do not trust companies claims due to bad experiences from food safety problems, when the most basic dimension of products-safety cannot be guaranteed; consumers’ confidence in companies significantly decreased. In addition, companies are perceived as having a lack of transparency in relation to ethical issues. These factors combined together increases the level consumer scepticism and cynicism. Meanwhile, there is a lack of appreciation of company’s good behaviour (e.g. donation) due to the large amount of negative reports about company and products in the mass media, consumers tend to focus on the negative incidents news and a hold cynical attitude towards companies and their claims.

3.5 Low Level of Consumer Perceived Effectiveness/Low Level of Locus of Control
Low level of consumer perceived effectiveness is considered as another impeding factor of ethical consumption for Chinese consumers. In other words, Chinese consumer does not believe that his/her individual behaviour can make a difference. For example:  ‘if you consider the air pollution, you shouldn’t purchase a car in Beijing, but the fact is that there are more than enough vehicles on the roads… we all got cars, we all drive here…’ (G2, participant 2)...’bigger emissions, of course cause more pollution. But some people just enjoy the bigger emissions and they gain pleasure from the noisy sounds of the exhaust pipe. Yesterday, the news reported that groups of young people were drag racing in the centre of Beijing; their exhaust pipes wide were wide! Where were the police? Shouldn’t anyone stop them?...’ (G2, participant 4)

Participants clearly understood the vehicles impact on the environment, because everybody drives a car, it makes it seems fine that everyone keeps driving a car. This showed that participant has no motivation to change his/her own behaviour to help reduce the emissions from car driving. This was discussed in previous studies (e.g. Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Wesley, Lee & Kim, 2012) that consumers low level of perceived effectiveness inhibited consumers’ involvement in the ethical consumption behaviour. Similarly, this phenomenon was described in consumer psychology and referred to as the external locus of control which means that individuals tend to believe that ethical dilemmas are beyond their control (Forte, 2004). This lack of belief in individual effectiveness contributes to another hindrance to popularize ethical consumption and raised the challenge for ethical consumption marketers that how to improve consumer’s perceived effectiveness; in psychological term, that is how to turn the external locus of control into internal locus of control, where individuals are more likely to make ethical decisions in defiance with conflicting social or situational pressures (Singhapakdi & Vitell, 1991).
4.0 CONCLUSION
This study offers the first focused exploration of the possible factors impeding Chinese consumer’s ethical consumption behaviour. Firstly, the study findings highlight a list of possible factors impeding Chinese consumers’ ethical consumption behaviour; which provide greater understanding of the ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ in ethical consumption. To bridge this gap, it is important to understand consumer’s perception; also it is essential to consider the environment where consumers live, as different cultural, social and political environment shape consumers perception towards ethical consumption behaviour. Secondly, these findings, on the one hand, are in correspondence with the existing Western literature; on the other hand, reflected the unique characters from a Chinese context, those similarity and differences among Western consumers and Chinese consumers, once more highlight the importance of culture in understanding ethical consumer behaviour as ‘ethical’ may be perceived differently in a different context. Thirdly, the findings also suggest that the consumer is only part of the marketing system. In order to promote ethical consumption behaviour, marketers, decision makers and the Chinese government are required to contribute their parts, by guaranteeing the safety of their products and to enhance their credibility, establish relevant legislation and standards to encourage ethical consumption development in China.

However, due to the limited scope of the study, it has limitations because it is conducted in a single city in Beijing, which would have impact on the representativeness of the research findings. Therefore, this study does not claim to represent the whole of Chinese consumer’s perceived inhibitors in ethical consumption behaviour. But it provides an initial understanding of the possible key factors shaping Chinese consumers’ ethical consumption behaviour from an urban consumers’ perspective. Further research to be conducted in a wider setting to expand to a wider group of consumers and considering their sub-cultural would be valuable. Moreover, Chinese consumers seem to have a different understanding of the concept of ethical consumption, further study on conceptualization of ethical consumption in Chinese context will be beneficial.

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