ADORNO AND MARCUSE’S CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MEDIA CULTURE AND
ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR MEDIA EDUCATION IN CHINA

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the educational insights in Adorno and Marcuse’s critical theory and discusses its implication for media education in mainland China. There are three main areas where their critical philosophy can strengthen critical pedagogy and media education in contemporary China: their analysis of the nature and effects of media culture, their critique of the educational system, and their aesthetic educational method with the aim of cultivating critical thinking. Given mass media’s significant role in shaping people’s understanding towards different social affairs, my thesis challenges the current technical mode of media education in mainland China, which stresses too much the teaching of technical knowledge while ignoring the cultivation of the ability to think critically. I also discuss the educational methods that teachers may use to cultivate critical thinking based on Adorno and Marcuse’s philosophy of education. As a philosophical inquiry, my thesis concentrates on theoretical analysis. By applying Adorno and Marcuse’s critical philosophy to contemporary China, I not only analyze the insights of their philosophy for understanding the current society, but also suggest that some opinions in their theory should be changed within the contemporary social and cultural context.
Lay Summary

In this thesis, I explore how to improve media education in mainland China based on the critical philosophy of Adorno and Marcuse. I argue that apart from teaching students how to use different media technology, teachers in China should also guide the students to respond to the information in mass media with critical thinking. The analysis of Adorno and Marcuse’s critical media studies within the social and cultural context in China contributes to a better understanding of critical philosophy, critical pedagogy, and media education.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Yue Li.
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Dedication

To my parents
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Positionality

Born in the 1990s, I experienced significant changes in the media industry in China and witnessed their profound influence on the culture and social norms.

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the production and distribution of “cultural products” (including newspapers, magazines, radio programs, TV programs, movies, and books) had long been under the strict and direct control of the propaganda system of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Media institutions were part of governmental organizations called “administrative units.” As non-profit institutions, media units were financially dependent on subsidies from the government and functioned as “propaganda tools” to promote the official ideology (Liu & McCormick, 2011).

In 1980, the introduction of business management into media institutions was a significant event that marked the inauguration of China’s media reform. During the 1990s, the development of media technology and increasing access to the internet have greatly reformed media industry in China. Mass media, especially the internet, provide a variety of information and a diversity of cultural products. As a product of mass media, media culture deeply influences people’s tastes, values, and opinions. Additionally, mass media also offer a public space where ordinary citizens can participate in the discussion of public affairs more freely. The access to globalized forms of media culture in China has made it difficult to control how and which media makes its way into the public realm. It is
increasingly difficult for the government to exercise its political hegemony through the control of the mass media (Cheung, 2016).

In contemporary China, people’s everyday lives have been deeply affected by mass media and media culture. It is especially true for young people, who are very active participants of the new media and the internet. The statistics from China Internet Network Information Center (CINIC) have shown that nearly a quarter of the internet users in China are under the age of 19 (CINIC, 2015). The figures from another recent report released by China’s internet giant Tencent Holdings Ltd. may be even more staggering: 90 percent of those under the age of 18 in China use the internet in their daily lives, and 95 percent of urban children (under 18) are web users (Song, 2016). Although young people’s thoughts, habits, and interests have the potential to be heavily affected by media culture, the development of media education in China is not satisfactory. The national curriculum offers very little media content, and most of it is devoted to technical aspects of media. In addition, the universal national curriculum provides one set of “correct” opinions towards Chinese society and politics. Based on my own experience, ideas and opinions on the internet often conflict with what I have learned in school and thus causes huge confusion in my understanding of history, politics, and society.

Media culture not only offers information and entertainment to the young people, but also influences their understanding of political practices and social change. Given this fact, an increasing number of Chinese educators have realized that it is necessary to introduce a formal media education into the Chinese educational system (Xia, 1994; Bu, 1997; Cheung,
2009; Cheung, 2016). Their discussion of media education concentrates on the following questions: What are the nature and effects of media culture? What is the purpose of media education? Moreover, what are the methods of media education?

In concert with educational researchers’ increasing interest in media study and media education, the Frankfurt School has also received raising attention in China. As an important branch of western Marxism, the Frankfurt School’s critical philosophy was introduced to China in early times. The critical lens regarding the market economy, mass culture, and social control that the Frankfurt School’s approach offers can also be a useful tool to criticize the social changes in contemporary China (Dippner, 2008). As the leading members of the first-generation of the Frankfurt School philosophers, Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse have developed detailed analyses of mass media and the popular media culture. They suggest that the mass media has a close relationship with the economic system and political practice. More than a tool of social communication, mass media can serve as a tool of state and social control. Although Adorno and Marcuse’s critical cultural study is mainly within the social context of Western countries in the twentieth century, it is still helpful in the research of the media culture in contemporary mainland China. As Shuqin Cui argues “in China, where a thriving market economy develops under the aegis of an authoritarian political system, official discourse and popular culture have merged” (Cui, 2006). The state control of cultural production and the universal national curriculum in contemporary China manifest an educational system that lacks critical rationality and independent thinking.
Despite Chinese academia’s increasing interest in the Frankfurt School’s critical analyses of politics, culture and even science (Fang & Xue, 1996; Ren, 1997; Chen, 2000), few Chinese researchers have elaborately discussed the Frankfurt School philosophers’ opinions on the practice of education or the educational insights in their critical culture studies. Adorno and Marcuse are also committed public educators who contribute to meaningful discussion towards the practice of a “democratic pedagogy” or “critical pedagogy.” They both have advocated education for promoting critical independence and rational thinking with the aim of political freedom and emancipation. In my thesis, I try to show that how Adorno and Marcuse’s critical theory can provide insights towards answering the questions raised earlier regarding the nature of media, the effects of media culture, and the purpose and methods of media education in contemporary mainland China. I argue that there are three main areas where Adorno and Marcuse’s theories can strengthen critical pedagogy and media education in contemporary China: their analysis of the nature and effects of media culture, their critique of the educational system, and their aesthetic educational method with the aim of cultivating political freedom and emancipation. Given the close interplay between media culture and politics as well as mass media’s significant role in shaping people’s understanding of social affairs, I argue for the importance of integrating critical thinking along the lines advocated by Adorno and Marcuse into Chinese media education.
1.2. Research Questions

The main purpose of my study is to analyze the educational insights in the Frankfurt School’s critical theory (mainly Adorno and Marcuse) and reveal how their philosophy can inform the critical media education in mainland China.

I ask the following specific research questions:

1) How do Adorno and Marcuse make critiques of media culture? How do they analyze the nature and effects of mass media and media culture?

Culture is in constant interaction with politics and social change. According to the Frankfurt School’s critical theory, media culture has a tendency to integrate individuals into the existing system of prevailing opinions and lifestyles via mass media, adversely affecting the capacity of critical and independent thinking (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972; Marcuse, 1964; Benjamin, Jennings, Doherty, & Levin, 2008). Adorno develops the concept of “culture industry” to describe and analyze mass media and its culture, while Marcuse discusses the negative effects of media culture in his critique of the entire “one-dimensional” social order (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1973; Marcuse, 1964). Both of them agree that media culture is not just an entertainment issue but can be a powerful tool to represent and reproduce prevailing opinions and values. Before the discussion of education, I first analyze the nature of mass media and media culture with a focus on the relationship between information and power, as well as media and audiences.

2) What are Adorno and Marcuse’s opinions towards educational practices? Why is it important to integrate critical thinking into media education?
In China, Adorno and Marcuse’s engagement with education is not as well-known as their critique of mass media and society. They also make a radical critique of the non-critical educational system and search for emancipatory pedagogy. In the analysis of mass media and culture industry, they assert that social and cultural systems together create a social order that lacks critical rationality and transformative practice. Instead of being another process accelerating alienation and standardization, Adorno and Marcuse urge education to regain its emancipatory potentials through cultivating critical thinking and independence. Critical thinking, according to Marcuse (1969), is the “negative” or dialectical thinking that challenges existing things and demands freedom from the oppressive and ideological power of given facts. Apart from teaching technical skills, teachers should also cultivate students’ ability to think critically. Adorno and Marcuse’s philosophy of education influences many educators in the area of critical pedagogy and media education.

3) How to integrate critical thinking into media education? Can Adorno and Marcuse’s theory provide any potential suggestions on the methods of critical media education?

If education should take the responsibility of cultivating critical thinking, then how can educators achieve this goal? In media education, this requires teachers to not only equip students with technical media skills but also relate media education to social studies, like the study of how mass media and media culture influence our understanding of different social affairs. Adorno and Marcuse’s aesthetic theory relates art and culture study to politics. In their view, aesthetics not only deals with beauty, but plays an essential role in shaping
students’ understanding of politics, social changes, and emancipation. This unique aesthetic approach may offer beneficial suggestions for critical media education.

Moreover, my thesis specifically tries to reveal how Adorno and Marcuse’s philosophy can inform the critical media education in mainland China. Therefore, I will relate the analysis to media culture studies and media education in China. Although Adorno and Marcuse’s critiques of media culture and education are mainly within the social contexts of Western countries in the early twentieth century, they are still useful in explaining the social problems in contemporary mainland China, such as the relationship between power and information, the relatively tight government control of the media industry, and the highly structured educational system. Based on the specific social conditions in China, I hope to show the necessity of integrating media study into the Chinese educational system and the importance of cultivating critical thinking through media education.

1.3. Research Methodology

My research methodology mainly focuses on theoretical and conceptual analysis, exploring different philosophers’ theories and developing my own argument. To begin, I introduce the critique of media culture made by Adorno and Marcuse, focusing on the nature and effects of media culture and the relationship between information and power, as well as audiences and media. Then, I explore the educational insights in Adorno and
Marcuse’s philosophy. Mentioned before, I concentrate on three main areas where Adorno and Marcuse’s work can strengthen critical pedagogy and media education: their critical analysis of the nature and effects of media culture, their critique of the non-critical education system, and their aesthetic education with the aim of political freedom and emancipation. During my discussion of Adorno and Marcuse’s critiques of media and education, I also try to connect the philosophical analysis with social and cultural contexts in contemporary China.

The critique of mass media and education is primarily based on the original texts of Adorno and Marcuse. I read for how the two philosophers analyze the nature of the highly commercialized media culture and how they relate popular culture with political practices and social affairs. In concert with their critique of mass media and culture industry, Adorno and Marcuse also critique the education system that helps to deepen the prevailing ideology rather than promote critical thinking. Many other educators are influenced by the Frankfurt School’s critical theory, including H.A. Giroux, Douglas Kellner, and David Buckingham. Their works are also considered in my analysis, particularly their detailed studies regarding critical pedagogy and media education. I concentrate on how these educators apply critical theory to contemporary educational research and employ it to develop media education with a core of critical thinking.

I would like to make my argument more relevant to the Chinese social and cultural contexts. Therefore, the work of Chinese scholars on the Frankfurt School, media culture, and media education is also included in the theoretical analysis.
1.4. Significance

In general, little attention has been paid to the educational insights in the Frankfurt School philosophy, or its critique is just treated as an introduction of the critical theory tradition (Kellner, 2009). In China, Adorno and Marcuse’s discussion of educational practices is far less well-known compared with their critiques of culture. However, pedagogical interventions are not just footnotes to the Frankfurt School’s cultural studies. They are key points to understanding the Frankfurt School philosophers’ entire critical social theory.

In Adorno and Marcuse’s view, both the purpose of education and the goal of their critical social philosophy are emancipation and democracy (Adorno, 1998b; Marcuse, 1969). Their critical philosophy provides theoretical support for human emancipation, while their discussion of education offers more practical suggestions on how to achieve this goal. They are not only critical philosophers but also committed public educators. Finding the educational insights in the critical theory of Adorno and Marcuse contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of their entire philosophy.

In the past two decades, media education has been a popular topic for Chinese scholars. Nevertheless, media education is not really put into practice in mainland China and lacks both official policy support and social participation (Tan, Xiang, Zhang, Teng, & Yao, 2012). According to the survey done by Zhang and his team (2013), on conditions in
mainland China, only sporadic and spontaneous teaching about the media exists in some schools and universities in the form of extracurricular lectures or online homework. Besides, the content of media education in mainland China emphasizes protecting students from negative media influences and teaching technical skills (Xu, 2009; Zhang, 2013). It does not fully cultivate people’s ability to think critically, both systematically and explicitly. Adorno and Marcuse’s theory of the relationship between media and the audience, as well as media culture and political practices has inspired many educational researchers to incorporate critical thinking into the media education. By revisiting Adorno and Marcuse’s philosophy, we can better understand the emancipatory power of education against alienation and de-humanization of culture and society. This revisiting can benefit efforts to cultivate students’ ability to think critically about information in various media forms and to prepare students to participate in wider society as responsible citizens. The analysis in my thesis not only contributes to the development of Chinese media education, but even promotes the advancement of democracy and political freedom in China.

Moreover, most critical studies of media culture and media education are within Western (mainly European and North American) contexts. An analysis dealing with the unique conditions of contemporary mainland China can enrich the discussion in the areas of both cultural studies and education.
1.5. Structure of Thesis

The thesis contains five chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction. It includes research background information important to this thesis and my personal history that drew me to this research topic, followed by research questions, methodology, and the significance of the study. Chapters 2–4 will be the analysis of the educational insights in Adorno and Marcuse’s critical philosophy. I focus on three ways that Adorno and Marcuse’s work can contribute to contemporary media education in China: the critique of media culture, the critique of education, and the theory of aesthetic education. Each of the three chapters deals with a specific aspect of these contributions. In chapter 2, I discuss Adorno’s analysis on culture industry and Marcuse’s theory of “one-dimensional society” with a focus on the relationship between political practices and culture, as well as power and information. In chapter 3, I analyze Adorno and Marcuse’s theory of education, including their critique of the non-critical educational system, arguments on the purpose of education, opinions of the role of educators and so on. In chapter 4, I discuss how Adorno and Marcuse’s political aesthetics can inspire critical pedagogy and media education in contemporary China. At the end of each of the three chapters, I demonstrate how the analysis relates to contemporary China. The final chapter is the conclusion of the whole thesis wherein I briefly summarize my analysis of Adorno and Marcuse’s critical theory and its implications for media education in China. Apart from the summary, I also discuss the limitations of my research and future research possibilities.
Chapter 2: Adorno and Marcuse’s critique of Mass Media and Media Culture

2.1. Introduction

This chapter concentrates on Adorno and Marcuse’s critical analysis of mass media and media culture. Media industry and media culture have developed rapidly since the twentieth century, under the influence of mass media (primarily TV, but also the press, radio, cinema and contemporarily, the internet). Far from being harmless entertainment for the public, media culture is an enchanting devil in the eyes of many Western theorists. According to the Frankfurt School philosophers, like Adorno and Marcuse, media culture is in constant and close interaction with ideological practices. Deeply permeating the everyday life of the modern society, mass media can act as a powerful tool to represent and reproduce prevailing opinions and values (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1973; Marcuse, 1964).

As the media industry is progressively becoming commercialized and market-oriented, it transforms art and culture into a system of consumption, treating people as mere consumers. Most early Frankfurt School philosophers showed a collective concern that people’s ability for critical thought may wither away under the influence of prevailing opinions or values presented by mass media. In opposition to the trend that mass media may become a tool of manipulation, Adorno and Marcuse have not only developed a detailed critique of mass media and media culture, but have also sought to find ways to rediscover critical thinking.
How do Adorno and Marcuse criticize mass culture? This question concerns their view of the properties of media culture, their analysis of the functions of mass media, and even their diagnosis of the whole modern society. Mainly based on Adorno’s study of the culture industry and Marcuse’s theory of one-dimensional society, this chapter develops a critical analysis of media culture with a concentration on the relationship between political practices and culture, power and information. Additionally, I further investigate the strengths and weaknesses of Adorno and Marcuse’s cultural critique in more contemporary contexts and make connections with specific cultural and social conditions found in mainland China.

2.2. Culture Industry: Adorno on the nature and properties of media culture

Most Frankfurt School philosophers equate media culture with a commercialized, commoditized mass culture and ideas. This definition is derived from the concept of “culture industry” developed by Max Horkheimer and Adorno (1973). In the Dialectic of Enlightenment (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1973), they use “culture industry” to refer to the branch of industry that deals specifically with the production of culture. According to the theory of culture industry, the properties of media culture are reflected in the following aspects.

**Standardization and Mass Production.** Media culture is a product of communication technology, which makes mass production and standardization possible.
Horkheimer and Adorno argue that in a capitalist society media culture is akin to a factory producing standardized cultural goods, such as films, radio programs, magazines, etc. (Horkheimer, Adorno, & Schmid Noerr, 2002). Certain reproduction processes are necessary to achieve the goal for “identical needs in innumerable places to be satisfied with identical goods” (Horkheimer et al., 2002, p. 95). By standardization and mass production, cultural products become homogenized and whatever diversity remains is constituted of small trivialities. Horkheimer and Adorno point out that “culture today is infecting everything with sameness” (Horkheimer et al., 2002, p. 94). Film, radio, magazines, and other cultural products together form a standardized cultural system that lacks diversity.

**Commercialization and Commodity.** The culture industry, like other industries, is commercial in nature. Horkheimer and Adorno note that cultural products “no longer need to present themselves as art” (Horkheimer et al., 2002, p. 95). In his earlier critique of music, Adorno had shown that popular music, like many other popular cultural products, shows “the characteristics of a commodity, dominated more by exchange than by use value” (Jay, 1973, p. 182). In other words, the commercialized cultural products have lost their function in order to be responsive to changes in social realities. They are market-oriented and just present the prevailing ideas.

**Manipulation and Deception.** What Horkheimer and Adorno (1973) stress most is that in the context of modern society, cultural products are used to manipulate public opinions and values. The implication of such a development is crucial to understanding their critical studies of media culture. They note that “the mechanical repetition of the same
culture product has come to be the same as that of the propaganda slogan” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1973, p.161). The culture industry transforms art and culture into a system of consumption, treating people as mere consumers. “[Culture industry’s] influence over the consumers is established by entertainment” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1973, p. 136) and the entertainment makes people believe that the deception is a kind of satisfaction.

To better clarify the nature of the “culture industry” or media culture, Adorno compares it with two other concepts: “authentic culture” and “mass culture” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1973). “Authentic culture” should leave room for independent thought. It can improve the capacity of human imagination by presenting suggestions and possibilities. On the contrary, media culture aims at manipulation and deception. Media culture is not an “authentic culture” in the sense that it is forced into pre-formed schemas and damages the public’s ability of critical thinking.

Additionally, Adorno disagrees that media culture refers to real mass culture, or the culture of the masses of people. As Adorno (1973) puts it, the culture industry falsely represents a seemingly democratic participation by the people. It is not something being produced by the masses or which conveys the representation of the masses. The involvement of the masses is superficial. Commercialized media culture is dependent on a passive audience and it is largely absent of inherent critical potential. It mainly serves to reconcile the masses to the status quo and thus constitutes a profound threat to freedom and individuality. Adorno argues that what is actually occurring is a type of “defrauding of the masses” (Horkheimer et al., 2002).
Adorno’s critique of popular culture hinges on his critique of late capitalist society. Late capitalism is the stage of economic development in which the concentration of capital has already taken place and productive capacities have been so far developed. In order to maintain profits, increasing consumption is necessary. The solution is to make workers into consumers by paying them higher wages. This, however, does not constitute worker emancipation, but a new form of alienation: instead of one’s consumption being based on one’s own needs, it is based on the capitalist’s need to keep demand high enough that profits can be maintained. In short, people’s needs are manipulated to the capitalists’ benefit. Culture industry does not seek to satisfy a need the consumer already had, but rather aims at creating an “artificial need” that was not previously felt. The result is that in late capitalist society, one is alienated not only from one’s creative, productive capacities, but also from one’s needs, drives, and imagination.

According to the culture industry theory, media culture is not emancipatory because, by its very nature as a product destined for mass consumption, it has no possibility of being emancipatory. The accessibility to the masses that makes media culture saleable is an indication that it does not produce the critical thinking through which the individual can be made aware of alienation. Culture industry tends to mask the alienation by providing diversion and pleasure, both of which make alienated life more tolerable. Media culture provides the illusion of a reconciliation between the individual and society through entertainment and pleasure, which gives the individual the feeling of being in harmony with his faculties rather than alienation from them by a repressive and manipulative society.
In conclusion, the theory of culture industry shows that media culture is akin to a factory producing standardized cultural goods. Through the repetition of certain well-established cultural formulas, capital and power administer, control, and produce superficial forms of a consumer culture. This mechanical reproduction adversely affects the capacity of human imagination and independent thinking (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972).

2.3. One-dimensional society: Marcuse on the influences of media culture

Adorno’s culture industry argument helps explain how the commodification of media culture contributes to both profit and social control, preserving a certain social order against internal challenges. This process is also elaborately discussed in Marcuse’s (1964) *One-Dimensional Man*, a book in which he explores the prevailing framework of technological domination in the “advanced industrial society” in which we still live today. Marcuse’s argument stems from the earlier discussion by Adorno of the culture industry, but he concentrates more on how modern technology (including mass media) has replaced traditional methods of political and economic administration and has become “the new form of control.” For Marcuse, “the new form of control” which is embodied by technological domination (advertising, mass culture, and consumerism) produces needs that contain and stabilize individuals into the framework of a consumer society: “The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is
anchored in the new needs which it has produced” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 9).

To better understand the function of mass media and influences of media culture in deepening the domination and hegemony, three important concepts in Marcuse’s work need to be clarified: “one-dimensional society,” “technology,” and “false needs.”

1) The term “one-dimensional society” suggests the totalitarian character of the advanced industrial society.

For Marcuse, a “one-dimensional society” is a concept which describes a state of affairs without critical thinking, “alternatives,” and potentialities that transcend the established social order. He explains,

By virtue of the way it has organized its technological base, contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian. For ‘totalitarian’ is not only a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests. (Marcuse, 1964, p. 3)

Advanced industrial society is organized on a technological basis. The technical apparatus of production and distribution functions not as an isolated instrument, but rather as a system of domination which determines, organizes, and perpetuates social relationships and individual needs. In the capitalist mode of production, capital controls social institutions as well as the state, media, educational, and ideological apparatuses while using them for its ends of maximizing profits and maintaining social control by eliminating opposition and integrating individuals into the capitalist system. The system
thus precludes the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole. Rather than encouraging critical thinking, the one-dimensional system tries to remove people’s reason for protest and change them into passive instruments in the chain of social domination.

2) “Technology,” or “technological rationality,” plays a significant role in creating the one-dimensional society.

In *The One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse determines technology as “an instrument for control and domination.” He says,

Technology serves to institute new, more effective, and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion. Technology as such cannot be isolated from the use to which it is put; the technological society is a system of domination which operates already in the concept and construction of techniques. (Marcuse, 1964, p. xvi)

Marcuse points out that technology in advanced industrial society can no longer maintain neutrality. Technology, as a mode of production, is more than machines and industry; it is also “a mode of organizing and perpetuating (or changing) social relationships, a manifestation of prevalent thought and behavior patterns, an instrument for control and domination” (Marcuse, 1998, p. 41).

When Marcuse talks about technological rationality, he refers to the productive apparatus in the broadest possible sense: all spheres of life are included. The productivity and efficiency of the system stabilize the society and lead the technological progress toward domination. From Marcuse’s viewpoint, an advanced industrial society is highly “rational”
in its capacity to become better in consummation and utilization of technological resources. However, it becomes “irrational” when technology is subordinated to the established system. In this context, Marcuse says,

The most advanced areas of industrial society exhibit throughout these two features: a trend toward consummation of technological rationality, and intensive efforts to contain this trend within the established institutions. The industrial society which makes technology and science its own is organized for the ever-more-effective domination of man and nature, for the ever-more-effective utilization of its resources. It becomes irrational when the success of these efforts opens new dimensions of human realization.” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 17)

To be more specific concerning media technology, mass media as well as the entertainment and information industry, carry with them habits and attitudes that they give to the whole society. The products indoctrinate and manipulate the passive consumers. When the products become available to more people in more social classes, the indoctrination becomes a way of life. For instance, mass production of chewing gum has become “a way of life” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 12). Mass media, in one-dimensional society, is a useful tool for the ruling class to manipulate needs, to integrate potential opposition, and to manage and administer society in accord with its own interests.

3) Technology and capitalism create one-dimensional society by creating false needs. In Marcuse’s one-dimensional society, “true” needs are suffocated and replaced by “false” needs within the framework of technological domination. There are certain “false
needs” propagated by media culture in order to both produce capital and deflect people from recognizing their own objective interest in total social transformation.

Marcuse distinguishes both true or vital needs that are necessary for human life (nourishment, clothing, and lodging), and false needs which are “superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 5). For Marcuse, false needs are heteronomous in that the individual is manipulated by social interests. They are neither necessary for human life, nor are they arrived at through autonomous and rational deliberation. Most false needs are to have fun, to relax, to love and hate what others love and hate, and to behave and consume as they see in advertisements (Marcuse, 1964, p. 5). For example, if a company introduces a certain type of boots into the market, many people will dress in this type of boots. Or, a car company may offer a new model of car which is much better than the previous model of car because it has one more valve more than the previous model. Mass media imposes advertisements in a brutal way that conveys to us that we cannot live without the boots or the new car. This kind of uniformity is one of the main characteristics of a consumer society. The consequence of that kind of fashion, behavior, or “manipulative interests” is that certain attitudes and habits become the prevailing way of life, and thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior in relation to certain dominant ideas, aspirations, and objectives.

After clarifying the three important concepts in one-dimensional society, the following question is imposed: “How can the people who have been the object of effective
and productive domination by themselves create the conditions of freedom?” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 6). At the end of *One-Dimensional Man*, he writes,

> The unification of opposites in the medium of technological rationality must be, in all its reality, an illusory unification, which eliminates neither the contradiction between the growing productivity and its repressive use, nor the vital need for solving the contradiction.” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 256)

Marcuse believes that social conflicts and tendencies toward a social change exist in the one-dimensional society. He argues that people have to be the force of social change, but not the force of social cohesion. According to Marcuse, when people become conscious that they serve repressive needs, they can liberate themselves from the prevailing repressive false needs. “The optimal goal is the replacement of false needs by true ones, the abandonment of repressive satisfaction” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 7). Liberation from “false” needs includes denial of the systems of consumption of waste and the affirmation of “true” needs. Therefore, people’s abilities of critical thinking and rationality must be restored.

Reviewing media culture under a broader social context, Marcuse tries to show how culture as an ideology conceals the grip of domination and the reality of alienation. From the above discussion, it is clear that mass media and media culture play very important roles in the formation of a one-dimensional society. For Marcuse, the dangers of the media culture are not only assimilating potentially oppositional realms of culture but also replacing the negative and critical thought with an operationalized way of thinking and an attendant set of values.
2.4. Discussion

The relationship between critical theory, popular culture (mainly media culture in contemporary society), and mass communication is embedded in the history of recent cultural criticism, a history which gained importance with the realization that understanding political and social change must also mean understanding culture, and, in particular, the process of social communication. Adorno and Marcuse take mass media and media culture seriously and study them rigorously. They recognize that media culture is an important venue of political analysis and critique. Their critical theory has provided insights into the relationship between information and domination, culture and politics, and more specifically, into the role of media.

However, Adorno and Marcuse’s critique is mainly within the social context of the twentieth century western countries. It is inappropriate to apply their analysis to any other social conditions without acknowledging different forms in various countries. Additionally, the mass media has experienced impressive development in the past few years. When coping within contemporary media culture or the social context of other countries, some limitations of Adorno and Marcuse’s theory must be acknowledged. In the following session, I will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their culture studies and connect their analysis with contemporary mainland China.
2.4.1. Adorno and Marcuse’s critical culture studies for understanding current society

Adorno and Marcuse’s critiques of media culture have the same basis. Their arguments go a similar way: late capitalism needs to ensure sufficient consumption to match production. It must also ensure social control, which is implied by the imminent prospect of a world in which basic needs can be met by deploying advanced technology rationally. As a result, the culture industry stimulates consumption and represses critical thought: people identify themselves with their leisure and consumer lifestyles. Thus mass culture involves inseparable economic and ideological dimensions. Adorno and Marcuse both regard media culture as political and ideological. In their view, commercialized media culture is largely absent of inherent critical potential, and instead dependent on a passive audience. It mainly serves to reconcile the masses to the status quo.

The analysis of culture industry and the idea of “one-dimensionality” was prescient when it appeared in the last century. In the past few decades, the marketization and globalization of economy, technology, and culture has evolved rapidly. The trends that Adorno and Marcuse identified have deepened into continuing, stable practices that would be difficult to reverse. Their theory is worth revisiting in order to understand the current social affairs and to search the future possibilities.

To begin with, Adorno and Marcuse introduce an ideological dimension to the study of mass media and media culture. They provide a radical alternative to thinking about the role of mass media in the context of market-driven societies. Media conveys more than entertainment and can produce ideological meaning. Their critical perspectives draw our
attention to the issue of political and economic interests in the mass media and highlight social inequalities in media representations. It helps to situate media texts within the larger social formation. Content analysis and semiotics may only shed light on media content, but Adorno and Marcuse’s critical theory highlights the power relationship in mass media and media culture. Even today, the attempt to understand the notion of media effects and their consequences cannot ignore the ideological analysis as it continues to relate to social, commercial, and political issues of the society.

In addition, Adorno and Marcuse regard the mass media as a place for ideological meaning, thus opening up the possibility to relate media studies with politics. Their critical media studies can also deepen the understanding of political issues, including democracy and emancipation. The focus on the nature of ideology helps us to deconstruct many taken-for-granted values and thus encourage critical rationality and social change. Adorno and Marcuse recognize the importance of power and confirm the significance of ideology in communicative practices. More importantly, both of them insist that the goals of their respective inquiries are the critique and transformation of specific social, political, and economic conditions for the purposes of social and political change, specifically, and human emancipation, generally. Adorno and Marcuse relate the idea of social communication to the emancipatory struggle of the individual or the society as a whole. The final purpose of exposing the power relations in the media texts is to restore the critical thinking.

Overall, Adorno and Marcuse’s political considerations of communication and media
lead to a discursive shift that provides alternative ways of conceptualizing media, popular culture, the public sphere, and the nature of political and social practices. They inspire critical rationality and the rethinking of social problems. Contemporary society is technologically sophisticated, diverse, complex, networked, and self-satisfied with relative economic security and the pleasures of consumerism. Adorno and Marcuse’s study on the ideological dimension of mass media and the new forms of social control is worth revisiting to understand the increasingly complicated interaction between culture, the political and economic system, and social communication.

2.4.2. Limitation of Adorno and Marcuse’s critical analysis of mass media and media culture

Adorno and Marcuse’s writing could be found wanting on at least three counts: (1) their over-concentration on the production and content of cultural forms, (2) the dominant ideological thesis that operates through their account of media culture, and (3) the overly pessimistic outlook of the marketization and commercialization of culture industry.

1) The development of contemporary media and cultural studies over the past decade or so could be characterized by more focus upon reception contexts. Adorno and Marcuse overly stress the production of cultural forms but ignore the reception by the audiences. In their view, audiences are rather passive. Recently, more theorists demonstrate in their research that audiences may not only passively receive information through mass media
but actively interact with it in the process of meaning-making.

For example, in his book *Common Culture* (1990), Paul Willis studies the way young people actively make sense of popular cultural forms. He shows that without waiting for the educational benefits of a reputedly more sophisticated high culture, young people are seeking pleasure, autonomy, and a sense of self through a commercial culture. For Willis, philosophers like Adorno and Marcuse, who do not clearly distinguish between the production and the reception of modern cultural forms, are usually unable to account for the possible liberating consequences of contemporary media culture. Adorno and Marcuse reduce the audience to lethargic couch potatoes, and at the same time overestimate the extent to which the media are responsible for the reproduction of asymmetrical social relations through a hegemonic discourse.

Over the last three decades, the increasing accessibility to the internet has helped generate a new mode of communication and has redefined people’s engagement with mass media (Lievrouw, 2012). Compared with before, people can interact with each other and participate in media culture more actively on the internet. Contemporary media culture is not the mass form of deception Adorno and Marcuse assume it to be, but neither, I would argue, is it a totally open, participatory culture. While Adorno and Marcuse have been criticized, correctly in my view, for ignoring the interpretative activity of audiences, the control of media information still exists within contemporary culture. Forces of capital and the interests of the market still influence the production of cultural products heavily. And in some countries, like mainland China, the market economy develops under the aegis of
an authoritarian political system. Apart from the influences of economic and technical factors, the state also exerts great influence over cultural content. The use of censorship to prevent media culture with “political overtones” subverts free speech and political freedom.

Currently, people are not “couch potatoes” who receive all the information passively, but it would be overly optimistic to say that everyone has the ability to think critically when he or she participates in the media culture. Education should take the responsibility of guiding people to participate in media culture with rationality and independent thinking. It is not only a matter of using media technology correctly but also responding to the information in media culture with a critical analysis.

2) Adorno and Marcuse suppose that the culture industry removes the grounds for critique, while binding the masses to a hegemonic status quo. They capture a dominant theme in Western Marxism: the reproduction of the status quo can be best explained through the ideological incorporation of subordinate social groups. This position assumes that in order for social systems to legitimize themselves, they are required to integrate social subjects into society. Adorno and Marcuse tend to assume that the popular media culture tries to produce one certain set of prevailing values and opinions. However, in the past few years, media culture has provided various cultural products that explicitly target certain segments of the audience to achieve profit-maximization. It has shown more diversity than homogeneity in the information and values it has provided. The dominant ideological thesis has proved incapable of explaining both the diversity of modern cultural patterns and the complex processes of psychic identification that are induced through
reception. Contemporarily, certain hegemonic capabilities are retained by the media, but the public sphere is a more ideologically unstable construction than Adorno and Marcuse allow.

In Adorno and Marcuse’s dominant ideological thesis, some positive effects in the development of mass media have been ignored. I would like to keep open at least the possibility that people’s dynamic interaction with media culture can lead to more open debate and more rational thinking of diverse political and social affairs. It is important to stress that, concerning the role of mass media, researchers do not have to make a choice between the tool of domination or the instrument of emancipation. Media culture, given certain structural conditions, is capable of being either one. A more nuanced approach should seek to highlight the tension between both positive and negative influences of media culture.

3) Adorno and Marcuse regard media marketization and commercialization as a great threat to culture. A “high” form of culture is perceived by them to be in danger of being swamped by a “cheap” popular culture. This overly pessimistic outlook of the marketization and commercialization in culture industry may be prejudice. The influence of marketization and commercialization is not entirely negative.

Marketization and commercialization shift culture industry towards the ambit of commerce and trade. Thus, to some extent, they can also pull the media away from its traditional, historical association with political groups and political institutions. Take the Chinese media culture as an example. Since the introduction of business management into
media institutions, private organizations and independent artists have had more opportunities to tackle some taboo topics, such as HIV Aids and homosexuality. These works have diminished the long-standing government control of the cultural production to some extent. Also, these works contribute to the struggle against discrimination in contemporary China. I strongly agree that we need to prevent the danger of vulgarization in commercialized culture, but the positive effect of commercialization should not be denied.

2.4.3. The connections with contemporary China

Mentioned before, Adorno and Marcuse’s critical analysis of mass media and media culture is mainly within the social context of Western countries in the twentieth century. However, their analysis is also helpful in research of the media culture in contemporary mainland China, which has caught on to the latest global cultural production and marketing trends at an astonishing pace since the 1990s.

The rapid marketization of the economy, bolstered by the enormous absorption of foreign investment and China’s links with the capitalist world-system, has significantly transformed Chinese media culture as well as the whole Chinese social life. The effect of marketization and globalization can be felt mostly at the level of everyday life. Western consumer culture, or popular media culture, has infiltrated the world’s largest marketplace. The sudden emergence of attractive shopping malls, the giant commercial posters of
multinational corporations, along with imported big-budget Hollywood movies, and CDs, all seems to validate the idea that China has now merged with the capitalist world-system, both economically and culturally. Given China’s rapid development as a society of affluence and commercialism, which is also manifested in media cultural productions, Adorno and Marcuse’s observation about the commodification of culture is quite helpful. The concepts of capital control and technological rationality need little qualification when used to describe what happens in China’s popular culture market: capital influences cultural production to maximize profits and maintain social control.

Although the world-system of capitalism and globalization has inevitably shaped the reality of the world, including the realm of media culture, it would be misleading to presume that popular culture in mainland China falls seamlessly under the hegemony of global capitalism’s cultural imagination. The dilemma of critical models of popular culture within the Western context is further complicated within the social contexts of mainland China. It would be a gross overstatement to say that China has fully merged with the world-system and thus that its cultural arena has become totally based on the free market. In China, the thriving market economy develops under the aegis of an authoritarian political system. Compared with Western countries, the media industry in mainland China is still under a relatively strict government control. The trend of media commercialization in China has not greatly changed the formal institutional monopoly over all media units; but it has created a new operational structure in which the media has been placed between the state and the markets. Both capital and the government play roles in the manipulation of ideology.
This structure requires a more complex model to analyze the political mechanism of manipulation, negotiation, diversion, and reconciliation.

Inspired by Adorno and Marcuse’s analysis of culture, ideology, and social control, many Chinese theorists have developed new models to describe Chinese media culture. For me, Liu’s “state-market complex” model may be the most appropriate one. He (Liu & McCormick, 2011) uses the term “state-market complex” to characterize the triangular relational structure of Chinese media. The word complex indicates that the media has to deal simultaneously with the power of the state and with market forces. Although the dominant tendency in media reform has been toward more diverse forms of public discourses, the government still has the power to ban books, magazines, TV programs, and movies that transgress the limits it has set. Besides, the government also has a considerable ability to promote the “main melody” cultural products favored by its leadership; it stimulates discussions on topics that it deems important (such as, in recent years, denouncing religious cults or fostering patriotic values), and either restricts the discussion of embarrassing problems (such as corruption, pollution, and human rights violations) or frames them in ways that dampen their impact (such as by favoring stories on corruption that show the party to be heroically struggling against a few bad apples).

Chinese society is now replete with tensions and contradictions as a result of its modernization and marketization programs. Yet, the policy of the post-Mao leadership has a tendency to simply ban any public debate about issues of political ideology and revolutionary legacy. This policy shows the totalitarian character of the one-dimensional
society, in which there is no critical thinking, “alternatives,” and potentialities that transcend the established social order. The one-dimensional system tries to remove people’s reason for protest and change them into a passive instrument of the social system. Such a project cannot, however, build on the fantastic spectacle provided by the global culture of transnational capitalism. China’s public sphere has been transformed away from the monopolistic type and will be continually transformed in a more pluralistic direction.

Faced with the above challenges, the most important lesson to learn from Adorno and Marcuse’s critical theory is how to rethink the cultural space, which is characterized by a diversity of forms, structures, and institutions. Mass media and media culture are more than just entertaining issues; they are closely related to political practices and social changes. After 30 years of market reform in the economy, China has advanced into a stage of a comprehensive transition in both politics and culture. For the development of democracy, people should take the responsibility to be rational participant instead of passive consumers of media culture. Thus it is necessary to incorporate media knowledge and critical thinking into the Chinese educational system.
Chapter 3: Adorno and Marcuse’s critique of education

3.1. Introduction

Control of the educational system has long been perceived as a primary tool for maintaining and legitimating political power and the ideology of those in power. In concert with their critique of the culture industry, Adorno and Marcuse also critique the educational system that helps to deepen the one-dimensional thinking rather than promote critical rationality. Their discussion on educational issues deeply influences other educators in the study of critical pedagogy as well as media education.

Adorno and Marcuse’s engagement with education involves a radical critique of the existing non-critical educational system and the search for the emancipatory alternatives. An introduction to their philosophy of education should be situated in relation to the Bildung tradition. Bildung, a German concept, opposes passive skill acquisition and standardization in education. On the contrary, critical self-reflection and resistance to heteronomous ways of thinking are regarded as the core aims of education. Adorno and Marcuse’s critique of education is mainly based on the principles of Bildung tradition. They claimed that education (in their time) was profoundly inadequate. In their analysis of culture industry, they have pointed out that social and cultural systems together create a social order that lacks negativity, critique, and transformative practice. Instead of being just another process accelerating alienation and standardization, education should regain its emancipatory potentials through cultivating critical and independent thinking.
This chapter discusses Adorno and Marcuse’s educational philosophy, including their unique understanding of the aim of education and the role of the teachers.

3.2. Critique of the educational system

In the words of Emile Durkheim:

it is society as a whole and each particular social milieu that determines the ideal that education realizes. Society can survive only if there exists among its members a sufficient degree of homogeneity; education perpetuates and reinforces this homogeneity by fixing in the child, from the beginning, the essential similarities that collective life demands.” (Durkheim, 1956, pp. 70-71)

Traditionally, education in the form of schooling has tended to reflect the needs and interests of the dominant group and institutional forces within any given society. Schooling has usually acted to transmit the prevailing culture—its customs, mores, and modes of rationality—to relatively powerless students. In Adorno and Marcuse’s view, the rapid development of economy and technology in advanced industrial society has not brought enough personal responsibility or reasoned autonomy to the schooling. Indeed, both of them see the educational system in particular, and culture in general, as promoting the polar opposite: the creation of dominant ideology and the cultivation of passivity.

Adorno’s critique of education is in line with his idea of culture industry. The prevailing civilization of mass media exerts pressure on the individual to conform, to
identify blindly with the collective, so destroying any power of resistance. Faced with this threat, education ought to take the responsibility of human’s emancipation. Therefore, education must be critical. Adorno’s work of public philosophy and educational theory mainly takes the form of radio broadcasts. In some public lectures, he discussed education as specifically “education towards critical self-reflection” (Adorno, 1998b, p.193). It is a process for the development of personal and social maturity and responsibility. As such, education cannot just be training but must be a developmental process which takes into account social and political realities involved in learning.

In his time, Adorno worried that instead of the promotion of critical independence, education for manipulation still ruled the world. He was especially struck by the fact that the systematic production of conformity and passivity in education is compatible with so many different ideological systems: America with its pseudo-Darwinian emphasis on “adaptation,” Germany with its legacy of Heideggerianism, and the Soviet Union with its own Marxist-Leninist authoritarian teaching styles (Adorno, 1970). According to Adorno, all these educational systems lacked critical thinking. They not only failed to cultivate free responsibility, but just generated a conforming population. Relating education to the domination of culture industry, Adorno resolutely opposes any educational system that cultivates conformity and passivity. In healthy educational systems, students should be cultivated into mature and rational individuals who are autonomous.

With Adorno, Marcuse begins his educational analysis after a lengthy survey of the whole social structure—its politics, economics, and culture. The outcome of Marcuse’s
socio-educational critique is implicit in his own Marxian analysis: schooling has become thoroughly politicized. In the one-dimensional society, education has become an instrument of social control which fosters repression and cohesion by developing social values directed towards the maintenance of an existing order. Education’s emancipatory potential is turned into a process accelerating alienation and standardization for the sake of the cultivation of one-dimensional society’s established values. This kind of educational system simply reproduces the status quo rather than fosters critical, multi-dimensional human beings.

According to Marcuse, the political socialization can begin in the cradle and proceed even beyond the university. Since media culture permeates everyday life, the dominant ideology and the process of manipulation go far beyond the educational system. Assimilated by the pervasive logic of domination, the individual may be largely oblivious to their actual subjugation. Liberating education should distinguish itself from domesticating schooling. Therefore, critical reflection must be an essential part of the educational system: “it allows human reason to transcend the limiting nature of purely empirical, linguistic, or phenomenological analysis” (Vitis, 1973, p. 260). Marcuse supports the liberating educational system that is meant to enrich the individual and transcend the present conditions that inhibit and stifle human development.

Marcuse tries to theorize a new notion of education. As opposed to other radical leftist thinkers of the time, he refuses to abandon the notion of public schooling. Instead of “deschooling” (Illich, 1970), he argues for “reschooling”, a normative concept based on
enhancing genuine freedom and democratic sensibilities rather than on domination and hegemony. In *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), he proposes a utopian educational plan for qualitative change. He explains, “Such a practice involves a break with the familiar, the routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things so that the organism may become receptive to the potential forms of a nonaggressive, non-exploitative world” (Marcuse, 1969, pp. 4-6). Marcuse aims to build a political and moral radicalism which would create socially-induced needs conducive to a truly rational and critical sensibility. Critical thinking is the core of this practice.

Comparing non-critical schooling (as manipulation and social reproduction) with *Bildung* (as the critical and reconstructive movement toward future possibility), it is clear that Adorno and Marcuse’s critique of the educational system is closely connected with the aim of revolution and emancipation. As Marcuse argued in a speech at Berkeley in 1975, “We cannot change the goals of education without changing the society which sets these goals” (Marcuse, 1975). Faced with the increasing standardization of school systems and the marginalization of arts-based education programs and the humanities, Adorno and Marcuse’s emphasis on the connections between education, critical thinking, and transformative practice seems more pressing than ever.

3.3. The aim of education and the role of teachers

The previous part briefly outlines Adorno and Marcuse’s critique of the educational
system, but their educational theory is actually not systematic and specific. Their specific views on the aim of education and the role of teachers should necessarily be largely inferred from their broader social theory. What can be ascertained is the methodology and value-orientation which Adorno and Marcuse bring to the educational issue. In brief, these can be delineated in terms of a dual objective: primarily, the necessity of generating a social critique, followed by a concern for a radical transformation of human needs. Both aspects are closely related to the ability of critical thinking.

Adorno (1998b) promotes an education that can challenge authority. The purpose of education should aim to cultivate responsible individuals who are autonomous, setting their own path, and are guided only by responsible consideration and critical reflection. Marcuse (1975) also believes that there is a real possibility that education can act against this alienation and oppression. He urges education as counter-movements to alienation. Critical rationality is thought to transcend the prevailing logic of the one-dimensional society and to teach radical action toward justice and human fulfillment.

Reflecting on the role played by teachers in the Nazi era, Adorno points out that mass education can be the most powerful institutional tool in shaping and changing how people think and behave (Jessop, 2016). He then makes a distinction between the teacher as a “specialized technician” and the teacher as an “intellectual.” As an “intellectual,” the teacher need not have a great deal of “facts” (specific knowledge and skills of a certain subject), but he must have the ability to guide the students to think, to question, and to be entangled in the immanent criticality of the society. The students who seem to have caused
Adorno the greatest vexation are not unintelligent or lazy. They have the ability to read the requirements of the task and followed them with precision; they study hard to acquire the information that they hope would enable them to pass their examination. However, they do not seem to be able to think, to respond to what they had read, and to care about its meaning.

Adorno is quite scathing about the technical or fact knowledge and describes it as a “patchwork of acquired—which most often means memorized—facts” (1962/1998a, p. 27). Rather than technical knowledge, it is the connectivity between the student and the society that matters. It is this connectivity that makes an individual a responsible member of a society. The capacity to make such connections involves autonomous thinking and critical reflection. This is much more important than factual knowledge. For Adorno, a teacher should be someone who is able to demonstrate an interest in making connections and comparisons, in questioning what happens to be the case, and in being personally entangled in the immanent criticality of the situation.

Marcuse also argues that social criticism is a significant duty of educators, and he proposes more specific suggestions to achieve this goal. In some discussion related to higher education and university, he clearly points out the critical function of the educational institutes, especially the universities (Marcuse, 1965). However, largely funded by government, foundations, and corporations, education and research are influenced by the interests of dominant groups rather than real humanistic interests. Marcuse, therefore, recommends an uncontaminated “academic reservation” where study can be free from outside pressures. He desires to re-establish the university as a refuge of mental
independence. This would entail a pronounced shift in emphasis in favor of pure theoretical research over simple applied study. Given his assumption that the educational system plays a significant role in legitimating political power and maintaining the ideology of that power, Marcuse here is understandably worried about the illegitimate use of technological knowledge by a political system which he considers to be totalitarian.

Adorno and Marcuse both support the idea of teachers being critically intellectual, and this is closely related to their critical theory. However, another of Adorno’s important educational suggestions, that “culture requires love,” is often ignored. I think this suggestion is also highly helpful in the context of the activity of teaching. As Jessop (2016) notes, teaching is a hopeful activity, which demands resilience in the face of setbacks, and trust in the possibility of future maturation. Love, as value and commitment inherent in the role of the teacher, goes beyond the knowledge, skills, and processes involved in teaching. It illuminates what drives and maintains the relationship between teacher and pupil. A good teacher should warmly identify with his or her pupils and is far from indifferent to what happens to them, and, by implication, what happens to the world they will occupy, make, and inherit. Through instrumental rationality, the very logic of advanced industrial society, love is ignored while coldness has infected everyone. This is what Adorno believed made Auschwitz possible (Adorno, 1998b). Responsible teachers should have the potential to be where students can encounter the richness and variety of human experience through learning and also through personal contact with the beliefs, values, and traditions of different people.
3.4. Discussion

3.4.1. Implications for critical pedagogy and media education

In the past few decades, researchers from around the world have studied the localized and globalized changes in youth and youth cultures associated with mass media (Giroux & McLaren, 1994; A. Luke, 1999; Skelton & Valentine, 1998). Technological advances (e.g., cable access to the internet, books on audio, CD-ROM; or computer notebooks, home shopping on TV, interactive music CDs) have spawned new forms of media cultures that are proliferated using these same kind of communicative technologies by way of, for example, chat rooms, e-mail, or SNS (Social Networking Services). More complex living, entangled within the multi-cultural forms has led to questioning the design of media education to address people’s shifting formation of cultural practices and their understanding of the various social issues.

Many educators in the field of critical pedagogy and media education, like Henry Giroux and David Buckingham, base their thought on the pioneering work of Adorno’s culture industry and Marcuse’s one-dimensional society. Their central argument is that teachers have a responsibility to introduce and employ critical thinking in the classrooms, which is necessarily in opposition to the hierarchal power order and one-dimensional forms of communication which treat people as passive receivers. Cultivation of critical thinking has become the central concern of current media education studies. According to David
Buckingham (2003), media education with the aim of critical thinking is concerned not only with teaching *through* media, but also with learning and teaching *about* media. He notes that critical media education should be “teaching about media,” which means it should not only include different forms of mass media and popular culture, but also deepens the potential of education to critically analyze relationships between mass media and audiences, as well as information and power. Buckingham (2003) also writes that, “the term ‘media literacy’ refers to the knowledge, skills, and competencies that are required in order to use and interpret media” (p. 36). This profound definition reveals two significant characteristics of media education. One characteristic is about teaching students how to use media, and the other concerns how to understand media, especially information from media.

Mentioned before, Adorno and Marcuse’s critical analysis of media culture pays much less attention to the reception by audiences. In addition, they argue for the necessity of critical thinking in education, but they have not provided enough specific suggestions regarding how to achieve this goal. Many current educators propose that we should no longer treat audiences as only passive victims of mass media, but embrace a new notion of audiences as active participants in the process of making meaning (Hall, 1980; Ang, 2002; Buckingham, 2003; Hammer, 2011). Hence, they suggest a perspective that seeks to empower students by giving them the abilities to read, critique, and produce media, which, in turn, teaches them to become active participants rather than consumers of media culture (Jhally & Lewis, 2006; Hammer, 2011). This constitutes a new form of pedagogy in which students can become more aware of how media is constructed and how it conveys dominant
ideologies. Moreover, these critical skills not only make students aware of how their own views of the world are mediated by media, but also enable them to learn how to critically read, engage, and decode media culture. According to Buckingham, media education “is seen here not as a form of protection, but as a form of preparation” (Buckingham, 2003, p. 13). In this way, students are prepared for future participation in the wider society as responsible citizens with the ability to think critically. Such an approach can strengthen the students’ other abilities in at least three aspects: first, it further empowers them to give voice to their ideas and visions in a diversity of ways; second, it invests students with the kind of communications skills and abilities to work cooperatively; third, it asserts the students’ own individuality and creative and organizational talents.

In the sense that critical media education aims to cultivate students’ abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies that are generated by media texts, it is an approach of not only media education but also political or civic education. I agree with Adorno and Marcuse that there is a huge difference between education that liberates and the domesticating schooling. Freire (1971) notes that, in essence, education is about helping students to learn to read the world as well as the word. Education should not just “equip students with skills to enter the workplace,” but also:

educate them to contest workplace inequalities, imagine democratically organized forms of work, and identify and challenge those injustices that contradict and undercut the most fundamental principles of freedom, equality, and respect for all people who make up the global public sphere. (H. A. Giroux & Giroux, 2006, p. 29)
In media education, it is about how the world of the media and popular culture can both resist and reinforce the interests of the dominant culture. Apart from technical media knowledge, media education also needs to stress on the development of political knowledge, attitudes, and skills. In this sense, critical media education is also “a preparation for real life in which facts, interpretations, opinions, and judgments are used to shape a personal value position” (Heater, 1990, p. 204), a preparation to be a responsible social member with rationality and critical thinking.

3.4.2. The connection with the Chinese educational system

Ever since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, ideological and political education has focused on collectivism and patriotism, and taught people how to submit to the collective and the state, as well as how to fulfill their obligations, with less reference to a citizen’s self-consciousness and individual rights. Even after the reform and opening-up\(^1\), the Chinese educational system has still struggled with the characteristics of traditional ideological and political education, which attempted to foster good law-abiding citizenry and emphasized the education of citizens’ responsibility, obligation, and morality. The educational system is highly structured and during the entire compulsory education, the universal national curriculum provides one set of “correct” opinions towards Chinese

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\(^1\) The “reform and opening-up” refers to the program of economic reforms in the People's Republic of China (PRC) that was started in December 1978 by reformists within the Communist Party of China, led by Deng Xiaoping.
society and politics. Students are encouraged to learn about the current social affairs only through the mainstream media, because it is supported by the government and provides opinions that conform to the national curriculum and the government’s ideology. Yet young students in their daily lives not only acquire information from textbooks and the mainstream media. Ideas and opinions on the internet often conflict with what the students have learned in school and thus may cause huge confusion in the students’ understanding of history, politics, and society.

In 2007, the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC; Chinese Communist Party [CCP]) first officially pointed out the national task of “strengthening citizen consciousness education and establishing ideas of democracy, rule of law, freedom, equality as well as justice” (CCP News Website, 25 October 2007). Since then, cultivation of responsible citizens and promotion of civic participation are becoming increasingly important themes in current Chinese educational and political life. In the last decade, the curriculum of ideological and political education across all levels of the educational system, from elementary schools to universities, has been further employed by the Chinese government as a fundamental way to achieve that target. It is true to suggest that currently in mainland China, young people do have more opportunities to engage with public life; however, the students’ exposure to political topics in the official curriculum involved mostly the description of the structure and functions of various departments of government and of the means by which they tackled various social problems like housing, health, pollution and transport. Ideas and values such as a legal system, democracy, freedom,
equality, fairness, and justice have long been ignored; it was even rarer to foster awareness of civil rights or to improve civil ability, skill, and knowledge of how to participate in public affairs.

In terms of media education, there is no clear official definition of media literacy or media education, but Chinese scholars define them in a similar way. Gong and Zhang (2010) write that the purpose of media education is to cultivate the learner’s ability to understand mass media wisely and to teach the learner to use, analyze, and evaluate various media information, thereby facilitating the construction of morality and critical thinking. Likewise, Lee (2010) notes that “media literacy is defined as a life skill which enables young people to critically understand, analyze, use and influence the media” (p. 3). These definitions all indicate that media education should involve cultivating the ability of thinking critically. Students should gain the ability to critically identify information hidden by the media because all media transfers information to audiences for particular purposes.

According to Adorno and Marcuse, any non-critical education, on the one hand, does no good to the reasoned autonomy of individuals; on the other, it goes against the development of a democratic and free society. Based on the previous discussion of critical pedagogy and media education, there are some recommendations I make for Chinese educators to improve Chinese media education. First, educators should enrich the content of media education. Apart from technical knowledge, content related to political practices, cultural studies, and other social affairs should also be incorporated into the media education curriculum. Second, educators should shift the application of media and media
culture from tool-focused orientation to critical-thinking orientation with the focus on the relationships between information and power, as well as culture and politics. They may then gradually reach the goal of developing a critical media education beyond protectionism according to changes in the Chinese social and political context.
Chapter 4: Political Aesthetics and Aesthetic Method in Media Education

4.1. Introduction

The previous two chapters offer a critical analyses of mass media and education, discussing the nature of media industry, criticizing the educational system and showing the importance of critical media education. Now the subsequent question appears: How is a critical media education possible? Or, what methods can teachers use to achieve the goal of instituting critical media education? Adorno and Marcuse’s aesthetic theory may provide a potential aesthetic method of critical media education.

Traditionally, aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that explores the nature of art, beauty, and taste, as well as the creation and appreciation of beauty. Moreover, in Adorno and Marcuse’s time, art had all too often remained merely an imaginary realization of beauty and pleasure, in the sense of a “higher culture” above and beyond the everyday order of existence (Marcuse, 1967). However, Adorno and Marcuse contend that in the time of mass media, art can become a potential instrument in the construction of a new reality. Aesthetics should not limit its study in the external sphere to the social and physical worlds as well. For Adorno and Marcuse, aesthetics stands at the very center of their re-humanizing critical theory (Adorno, 1971; Marcuse, 1978). In their view, aesthetics has a radical function, fostering the development of real, vital, and sensual needs and inspiring action that challenges the present condition. They urge art as well as education to be
counter-movements to alienation. An aesthetic rationality is thought to transcend the prevailing logic of performance and achievement in the one-dimensional society and to teach radical action toward justice and human fulfillment.

Adorno and Marcuse draw connections between aesthetics and politics, as well as between art and emancipation. They stress the value of aesthetics in the cultivation of rationality and critical thinking rather than aesthetics just as the knowledge of beauty and art appreciation. Their aesthetic theory inspires an aesthetic method of education, which cultivates students’ aesthetic rationality and spontaneously encourages a critical reflection on the cultural industry and one-dimensional social order possible.

4.2. The role of aesthetics and art in politics

Adorno and Marcuse believe that an advanced industrial society overwhelmed by commodity production and exploitation has created a one-dimensional social order and individuals who lack critical thought and action. Art could have developed and implemented its higher aims, not merely in the traditionally conceived objects of art, but in the fundamental, sensuous, and practical activities of human civilization. However, unfortunately, culture and art are also in danger of being commodified and losing the capacity to make critique and challenge in the advanced industrial society.

According to Adorno and Marcuse, popular art in advanced industrial society is commercial—it sells, comforts, or excites (Adorno, 1971; Marcuse, 1978). The
Commercialized cultural products have become cogs in the cultural machine that serves to produce prevailing ideology, and thus, aesthetic rationality has succumbed to technological rationality. Rathi (2015) describes this process as an “enslavement” since commodified art produces a popular culture in which it is difficult to raise intellectual standards and responsibilities through critical thinking. Adorno and Marcuse pointed out that there would be no knowledge or truth in the non-critical art.

Contrary to the non-critical commercialized art, Adorno and Marcuse promote an art that serves as a medium for critical thinking by upholding images of life that contradict the non-critical social order. It has the potential to counter oppression and domination. This kind of art must be “autonomous,” which means it has a political significance but it is not politically committed. Adorno does not pretend that a work of art can actually stand in some politically disinterested realm outside society. However, he also criticizes the politically charged art that will very likely end up as bad art without becoming good politics as well. Autonomous artworks should not be pressed into the service of any higher end. Instead, it must promote imagination, sensibility, and rationality. These works of art inspire people to make reflections of their experience with critical rationality and thus they are related to truth and knowledge.

In An Essay on Liberation (1969), Marcuse explains that knowledge needs to be reconstructed towards a new sensibility (or an aesthetic rationality) which is the demand of life instincts. It emerges out of the struggle against violence and exploitation, and it is fought to obtain a new form of life. This new form of life is one in which the aesthetic ethos
rises and the truly free individual enjoys the autonomy to think, choose, and act. Marcuse notes that

their sensibility would register, as biological reactions, the difference between the ugly and the beautiful, between calm and noise, tenderness and brutality, intelligence and stupidity, joy and fun, and it would co-relate this distinction with that between freedom and servitude. (Marcuse, 1969, pp. 60-61)

The educational goal that Marcuse proposes is the restoration of the aesthetic dimension as a source of cultural critique, political activism, and the guiding principles for the social organization of the future. In his estimation, the technological mindlessness and social fragmentation in the one-dimensional society have to be remediated philosophically through a broadened education of human conditions.

Closely related to the concept of emancipation, Adorno and Marcuse’s aesthetics aims at the development of a sensuous culture that would rebel against the domination and divert itself to the construction of an aesthetic environment rather than a repressive society. This change would gradually alter the dimensions of the society and progress to a stage where people would really know what they are working for and would be able to challenge repression and domination. It would create new societies with new incentives for work and life. The incentives would be built into the instinctual nature of humans, or in Marcuse’s word, the “true needs.”

In summary, Adorno and Marcuse suggest that art as a form of dialectical imagination has political content and is not merely spiritual or emotive. Aesthetics, or art, is political in
the sense that it can provoke our critical thinking to liberate us from the flattened horizon of one-dimensional perception. It suggests that things are not what they appear to be but possess hidden dialectical motion. Art should be autonomous and it can reconstitute reality beyond what the everyday communication presents to us.

4.3. Aesthetic method and media education

What are the relationships among learning and beauty, truth and art, and political education and human flourishing? In terms of education, Adorno and Marcuse repeatedly stress the difference between the multi-dimensional kind of knowledge produced by the aesthetic imagination and the one-dimensional kind of knowledge attributed to the controlled and repressive rationalities of domination (Adorno, 1998a; Marcuse, 1978). They propose that education should cultivate both the aesthetic rationality and political will to help us accomplish our humanization. According to them, aesthetic education aims to make students grow both emotionally and intellectually.

Adorno and Marcuse require teachers to teach art in a way that encourages autonomous experiences and imagination. Mentioned before, Adorno and Marcuse’s educational discussion is closely related to the traditional Bildung, that is, by dealing with a kind of “higher,” non-socialized culture to achieve the education and purification. In Adorno’s aesthetic theory, only the non-distorted and non-consummative works of higher culture like the music of Beethoven (see Adorno, 1971, p.112), or the philosophy of Kant—
works which cannot be easily assimilated by the mechanisms of the cultural industry—
allows the individuals to distance themselves from that industry and so to reflect critically
on the manipulation and domination.

The aesthetic method adhering to a “higher” culture may lead to another question:
How can people, especially young people, be motivated to deal with such “higher” cultural
works and so to distance themselves from the cultural industry which is literally
everywhere in contemporary society? Adorno’s answer to this question is that students
should be trained very early (i.e., in high school) to critically analyze commercial films and
magazines and to identify the manipulations which these media forms use, as well as to
understand how and why a pop song is objectively so incomparably worse than a string
quartet by Mozart or Beethoven (Adorno, 1971). However, this answer appears very naïve
as long as it does not explain how young people could be enabled by teachers to regard the
classical musical works as much better than pop songs, as well as to unmask the lies and
the manipulations of commercial films and magazines.

It is inappropriate to suggest that only very a small group of the elite which engage
with non-commercial forms of avant-grade art and music is capable of overcoming the
negative influences of the culture industry. The vast majority of educators are not “elitists”
as Adorno and Marcuse define. Most educators are also infected by culture industry and
thus may not initiate a critical reflection on it. The elitist notion makes the traditional
Bildung notion a rather utopian and impracticable one.

Some theorists, like Giroux, criticize the elitism in Adorno and Marcuse’s theory. He
notes that there is no need for them to “fall back upon an unfortunate legitimation of high culture in which particular versions of art, music, literature, and the philosophic tradition become a utopian refuge for resisting the new barbarism” (H. A. Giroux, 2005, p. 161). In their time, the media culture and popular art were badly influenced by commercialization and marketization. They represented very little critical or autonomous factors. I think what Adorno and Marcuse really object to is the non-critical art forms, not the entirety of popular art. Popular media culture has experienced great changes in the past decades. Not all the products of today’s media culture and popular art are vulgar commodities as Adorno and Marcuse used to see. For instance, the contemporary jazz and rock music has played an important role in the struggle against racial discrimination and apartheid in different parts of the world. Various works and activities of the media culture and popular art can articulate ideals of freedom and resistance, and they initiate the development of critical attitudes towards authoritarian structures and institutions. In contemporary media education, there is definitely no need to adhere to elite culture and any art form that contains critical factors can be used as materials for aesthetic education. Whether the art can promote critical rationality or not is the first criterion.

Increasing numbers of researchers have realized that there is an urgent need for teachers to engage with media, and for popular and youth culture to better understand how these discourses structure students’ knowledge and understanding towards politics and society (Giroux, 1999; Alvermann, 2000; Buckingham, 2003;). According to Buckingham (2003), effective media teaching should keep a balance between teacherly criticism and the
pleasure of popular culture. Students are more familiar and interested in everyday media culture and popular art. A teacher taking advantage of media culture and popular art can more easily achieve the pedagogical task of cultivating the ability to think critically. Meanwhile, the everyday media culture contains more direct connections with current political and social affairs compared with the so-called higher culture. Therefore, dealing with the materials from popular media culture is a more direct way to give students the skills with which to dismantle and dismiss ideologically oppressive texts, like identifying stereotyping, class bias, and sexist or racist content.

4.4. Discussion

4.4.1. The appropriate attitude towards contemporary media culture and popular arts

What I appreciate most about Adorno and Marcuse’s aesthetics is that in their eyes, art is not merely about beauty but is always a demand for authentic freedom. It can promote not only aesthetic rationality, but also a vision of liberation against any social control. Therefore, their aesthetic thought is permeated with a multifaceted concern for educational issues and radical action for our political future.

However, there is also prejudice towards media culture and popular arts in their theory. What Adorno and Marcuse share is that their investigation of popular forms is deeply structured by a shared attachment to a literary culture. A “high” form of culture was
perceived by them to be in danger of being swamped by a cheap popular culture. This overly pessimistic outlook of popular art forms and media culture is inappropriate. Various works and activities of the media culture and popular art articulate ideals of freedom and resistance, and they also have the ability to initiate the development of critical attitudes towards authoritarian structures and institutions. An example stems from Paul Gilroy’s *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* (1987). In his account, Gilroy convincingly demonstrates that black British popular culture is continually attempting to construct and reformulate traditions in black music that protest against racism. For Gilroy, these popular cultural forms represent a utopian yearning for a world where race is no longer the subject of the domination of one group by another. According to Gilroy, young blacks are able to forge a more inclusive global political identity that challenges their exclusion from citizenship. This critical reflection is of course dependent upon the commercial culture transmitted by the culture industry. Also, media culture and popular arts play significant roles in the struggle against discrimination and other related movements in mainland China. Take the Chinese film industry as an example. In recent years, many independent filmmakers have tackled many taboo topics such as HIV Aids and homosexuality within filmic narratives. Their work has diminished, to some extent, the state’s all-encompassing control and the dominance of socialist realist, pro-communist cultural production.

All the above examples demonstrate that popular art forms and media culture contain the positive elements that can inspire critical rationality or contribute to political and social change. Today, we live in a world that stresses equity and justice. There is no need to draw
a line between the higher culture for elites and the popular culture for the masses. In education, any art form, as long as it contains critical factors, can be used as educational material.

4.4.2. Suggestions for critical media education in China

In mainland China, there is no specialized course for media education in the national curriculum. The Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China (MEPRC) launched the eighth curriculum reform in 2001, which required that curriculum reform should emphasize media education (Zhong, 2006). However, this reform did not promote media education very successfully because the single relevant course (i.e., the IT course) put forward cannot be wholly considered media education. It only stresses teaching students the skills to use media but not a critical analysis of its content (Shao, 2006).

There is also a lack of effective educational methods regarding media education. Media knowledge is mostly contained and taught with other courses: History and Society courses teach media development, influences, and the attributes of modern media (MEPRC, 2011h, p. 13); Morality and Society courses require students to know types of modern communication technology, and to learn basic manner, morality, and laws relating to the internet (MEPRC, 2011d, p. 14); Ideology and Morality courses require students to understand the right of expression (MEPRC, 2011e, p. 16); and Arts courses suggest students compare different music genres and films, and learn technological influences on
the arts (MEPRC, 2011i, pp. 20-22). Little knowledge in these courses engages critical media literacy or critical rationality. Better educational methods, rather than just the technological skills, are needed in the cultivation of critical thinking.

Adorno and Marcuse’s aesthetic method suggests the potential to integrate media education into Fine Art and Politics courses. Combing aesthetics with media knowledge is beneficial in at least three aspects. First, according to Buckingham’s “playful pedagogy,” the contents of popular media culture offer “pleasure” to the students so they would be more engaged in the study of media knowledge. Second, in Adorno and Marcuse’s view, the aesthetics mediates between nature and freedom, as well as sense and intellect. When the aesthetic method improves student’s imagination and creativity, it simultaneously cultivates their morality and rationality. Third, the media culture interacts intimately with current political topics and social changes, which provides a variety of contents to the critical study.

The core of Adorno and Marcuse’s aesthetic method requires critical analysis and reflection rather than a superficial introduction of the media materials. Fine Art courses in mainland China serve as examples. They can be more critical on the use of media content. Currently, the Fine Art courses in mainland China prompt students to watch videos or other art in mediated forms. However, students are merely encouraged to comment or appreciate media texts rather than critically analyze their purposes, audiences, or representation (MEPRC, 2011b; MEPRC, 2011i). This method not only weakens the effect of learning critical media literacy but also destroys students’ independent and critical thinking skills.
In the critical aesthetic method, the teachers should adopt a more student-centered and inquiry-based approach. Students should at first be invited to appreciate and discuss popular art forms. More importantly, students should be guided to critically analyze the purposes, audiences, and the power relationships in these media contexts.

Adorno and Marcuse’s political aesthetics inspire us to combine media learning with art appreciation. Apart from Art courses, other courses and subjects also have the potential to be combined with media contents and critical thinking. Also, there are many other educational methods of critical media education. In the past few years, critical media literacy has attracted increasing attention in mainland China. More and more teachers have participated in the research of mass media and the teaching practice of media education. All the changes will contribute to the future study of media education methods in China.
Chapter 5: Conclusion and Discussion

5.1. Conclusion

I was born in the 1990s and have experienced great changes in China’s reform and opening-up process. In many ways, China today is freer and more open than it was thirty years ago. However, the opening-up policy has not reformed the old, highly structured educational system. The universal national curriculum provides one set of “correct” opinions towards society and politics. Additionally, students are encouraged to learn about the current social affairs only through the mainstream media, which only provide opinions that conform to the government’s ideology. Is this a good way to protect students from the so-called “junk culture”? Is this beneficial in preparing the young students to be future responsible members of society? From my own experience, it definitely is not.

Contemporarily, media culture permeates young people’s everyday lives. Ideas and opinions from mass media often conflict with what I have learned in school, and it causes huge confusion in my understanding of history, politics, and society. That is why I feel there should be some changes in Chinese education, especially media education.

As an important branch of Western Marxism, the Frankfurt School philosophy was introduced into China many years ago and its critical cultural studies have been treated as a tool to criticize what we called the “decadent culture” of the West. As China is becoming an advanced industrial country, it has to face many similar problems that Western countries faced a few decades ago. When I revisited Adorno and Marcuse’s philosophy, I tried to not
only treat it as a “destructive tool” to criticize the problems in media and education, but also to use it as a “constructive tool” to find educational potentials on how to solve these problems. In this thesis, I have explored the educational insights in Adorno and Marcuse’s critical theory and discussed its implication for media education in mainland China. There are three main areas where their critical theory can strengthen critical pedagogy and media education in China: their analysis of the nature and effects of media culture, their critique of the non-critical educational system, and their aesthetic educational method with the aim of political freedom and emancipation. The theoretical analysis offers potential answers to the following connected questions: What are the problems of media culture in contemporary China? Why is it necessary to integrate critical media knowledge into the educational system in mainland China? And what method can teachers use in the critical media education?

Both Adorno’s culture industry theory and Marcuse’s one-dimensional society study show that media culture plays an important role in producing ideology and manipulating public opinions and actions. In mainland China, the media culture is experiencing great changes due to the rapid marketization of the economy and the increasing connections with the capitalist world-system. At the same time, the government control of mass media and culture industry is still tight. Based on Adorno and Marcuse’s theory, media culture in China has an ideological dimension and its manipulating function plays out in a much more complex way under the dual influences of market and government. Media culture with an
aim of maintaining dominant ideology causes harm to people’s independent and critical thinking as well as the advancement of democracy and social justice.

In concert with their critique of culture, Adorno and Marcuse show the necessity and significance of integrating media knowledge into the Chinese educational system for the cultivation of critical thinking and autonomous rationality. The educational system in mainland China does not fully cultivate people’s critical thinking, both systematically and explicitly. According to Adorno and Marcuse, the non-critical schooling does no good to the reasoned autonomy of individuals and it also goes against the development of a democratic and free society. In terms of the media education, their theory inspires the Chinese educators to concentrate more on developing students’ abilities of critical thinking and autonomous reasoning rather than just teaching the media technology and practical skills.

Finally, Adorno and Marcuse’s political aesthetics provide advice on a potential method of critical media education. Media education can be combined with many other subjects and courses, especially with the aesthetics or art courses. Combining media knowledge with media culture and popular art makes the class content more engaging. Besides, it promotes critical thinking and aesthetical rationality at the same time, which is good for the students’ all-round development.

What are the intellectual, moral, and political qualities of life and thought that can make theory critical, society democratic, and education liberating? These questions continue as the central philosophical issues of our time. They challenge everyone that is
concerned with the increasing dehumanization of the civic, occupational, and personal spheres of our lives. Philosophers from Confucius and Aristotle to John Dewey and Paulo Freire have investigated, as the axial human problem, how education is to help us in accomplishing our humanization. Today we must still inquire into the conditions for a humanistic cultural transformation. That is why we need to revisit Adorno and Marcuse’s critical theory. Their analysis critically discloses the roots of the crisis pending in the economic, social, and political conditions of our existence. From the present, it helps us to envision intelligent choices about the real possibilities for our future. Adorno and Marcuse encouraged people to think more independently, choose alternative ideas, and express themselves as being supportive of democratic activities. A critical form of education has a great impact on not only the educational system but also the society as a whole.

5.2. Implications for theory and practice

Applying Adorno and Marcuse’s critical cultural studies to contemporary China, on the one hand, contributes to the Chinese critical media education; on the other hand, it helps to clarify some misunderstandings of their theory as well as reveal some other limitations of their work. It deepens the understanding of the critical theory and broadens its application. Towards the development of Adorno and Marcuse’s critical cultural theory, there are three points I have to restate.

First, media culture in nature is not just an entertainment issue as Adorno and Marcuse
claimed, but its influences on the audiences and its interaction with politics and other social affairs are much more complicated than in their time. Media culture has witnessed great changes since Adorno and Marcuse’s time, so their overly pessimistic attitude towards media culture and commercialized culture industry should be reevaluated as well. Commercialization and marketization make the cultural products more accessible to the masses and the discussion of social affairs more open and transparent. I have argued in both chapters 3 and 5 that contemporary media culture also contains positive elements that can inspire critical rationality and contribute to equity and justice. I agree that we should still beware of the threats that commercialized media industry may lead to, like capital control of cultural production and the vulgarization of media culture. However, the positive elements of contemporary media culture should not be ignored.

Second, I appreciate Adorno and Marcuse’s passionate argument on the necessity of critical thinking in education and the role of the teachers as critical intellectuals, but I do not support the tendency to treat students as only “passive receivers” in their theory. In their analysis of mass media and culture industry, Adorno and Marcuse pay much less attention to the receptions by the audiences and reduce the audience to lethargic “couch potatoes.” If we apply this idea to media education, it would be a very passive media education model in which students are just inactive receivers rather than active participants of media culture. As many current educators have proposed, we should embrace a new notion of audiences as active participants in the process of making meaning. Educators should empower students by giving them abilities to read, critique and produce media. This
constitutes a pedagogy in which students can be aware of how their own views of the world are mediated by media actively. According to Buckingham (2003), this positive media education is a “preparation” of students for future participation in the wider society as responsible citizens with critical thinking skills.

Third, towards the aesthetic theory, there is no need to make any distinction between “higher culture” and “popular culture,” “higher art,” and “popular art.” According to Adorno and Marcuse, the evaluation of art should mainly focus on whether it can promote aesthetic rationality and critical thinking. Although they show an obvious preference for higher culture, what they really criticize are the non-critical art forms. If they had lived in our time, they may not deny that today’s popular art has also developed many critical works of art. Instead of drawing a line between “higher arts” and “popular arts”, contemporary educators should distinguish “critical arts” from “non-critical arts”. Any art form, as long as it contains critical factors that promote aesthetic rationality as well as a vision of liberation against any social control, can be used as the material for critical media education.

Regarding educational practices, by revisiting the Bildung tradition, Adorno and Marcuse remind contemporary educators to resist passive skill acquisition and the standardization in education. Mentioned before, the cultivation of responsible citizens and the promotion of civic participation have become important themes in the ongoing Chinese educational reform. According to Adorno and Marcuse, this requires educators to stress more on critical thinking and independent rationality rather than “fact” knowledge and practical skills in their teaching. To be more specific in the field of media education, this
requires educators to not only teach the basic technical knowledge of mass media but also guide the students to critically analyze and reflect the power relationship between information and society.

Adorno and Marcuse’s educational advice is not flawless within the cultural and social contexts of contemporary China. Their advice on educational practice is closely related to the Bildung, that is, by dealing with a kind of “higher,” non-socialized culture to achieve the education and purification. The “higher” culture is not as attractive as popular culture to most young students, and it has very few connections with current political and social life. Contemporarily, the effective media teaching should better keep a balance between criticism and the pleasure of popular culture. There are also critical art forms in popular media culture, thus there is no need to adhere to “higher culture” in media teaching. Additionally, in critical media education, students should be encouraged to take part in the media culture more actively, as the conscious participants rather than passive receivers in the meaning-making process. Education is an interaction between students and teachers, or more broadly, it is an interaction between students and the whole society. The reaction of students cannot be neglected in the media culture analysis as well as in media teaching.

5.3. Limitation and future research possibilities

Based on Adorno and Marcuse’s critical theory, I tried to reveal some limitations of the current educational system in China and argue for the significance of incorporating the
critical thinking into media education. The research is mainly a theoretical analysis. It has provided fewer connections with educational practices. Another huge limitation is that I cannot understand German. All the Adorno and Marcuse’s works that I referred to are English or Chinese translated versions. Some conceptions cannot be accurately translated or the expressions obtained by means of translation do not always correspond. This may lead to some misunderstanding of the two philosophers’ original opinions.

In my analysis, I stressed the similarities of Adorno and Marcuse’s critical theory, like their shared critique of commercialized media culture and non-critical educational systems. Despite many similarities in their theoretical ideas, there are still some differences between the two philosophers, especially in their later works. For example, their views of emancipation and liberation are slightly different. According to Wiggershaus (1994), Marcuse speaks of liberation from exploitation and oppression, meaning the liberation of those who were exploited and oppressed. When Adorno speaks of emancipation, he is thinking more of a form of emancipation from fear, from violence, from the humiliation of conformism. He characterizes a “better condition” as one in which “one can be different without fear” (Wiggershaus, 1994, p. 394). On the conception of “emancipation”, Adorno’s view has less political meaning compared with Marcuse’s. Additionally, there are some changes in Adorno and Marcuse’s thinking and understanding of media culture, art and politics. Unlike Adorno, Marcuse affirms parts of the popular culture of the 1960s in his later works, such as African American music and Bob Dylan. Generally, towards popular art and media culture, Adorno is more elitist and conservative while Marcuse is more open
and genuinely interested in social change. In my thesis, I have not made enough analytic emphasis on the differences between the two philosophers and the changes in their critical theory. Reasons leading to the differences and changes in the two philosopher’s work are also worth studying.

Apart from discussing the differences and changes of Adorno and Marcuse’s critical philosophy, there are several other future research possibilities that can flow from this exploratory thesis. In my thesis, I have analyzed Adorno and Marcuse’s theory under the certain social and cultural contexts of contemporary China. When applying their critical philosophy to the social conditions of other countries, there may be different understanding and discussion that can enrich the study of critical theory and media education. More research can be done to highlight the differences in politics and society of Western countries and Eastern countries and to study how these differences influence media study and media education. In addition, there are many different branches of the Frankfurt School theory and this school itself experienced great changes in the past few years. Comparing Adorno and Marcuse’s work with other Frankfurt School philosophers’ theories may also deepen our understanding of the entire Frankfurt School philosophy. Finally, I hope there will be more research on the specific educational methods of the media education in China. Studies can be done on many topics: What are the specific ways to combine critical media literacy with art courses? What are other courses that can be combined with media knowledge and critical thinking? And how to make a good combination? All these kinds
of research would be very beneficial for our understanding of media culture studies, critical pedagogy, as well as media education.
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