

Original article

# Culture and Taste: The Cultural Aesthetics behind Chinese Children's Preferences for Sesame Street Character Images

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**Abstract:** A study of 1,082 Chinese preschool children (aged 3–6) across five regions (east, west, south, north, and central) examined their preferences for images of 16 Sesame Street Muppets. The results reveal shared aesthetic preferences among children, with key influencing factors being, in order: physical body features, costumes or props, and facial features. Chinese preschool children strongly preferred images that matched their cognitive experiences—realistic and concrete—while rejecting surrealistic depictions that fell outside their aesthetic expectations. Analysis of implicit connotations in character preferences suggests that Chinese children favor images embodying traditional "positive traits" of cultural expression. The subtle influence of "virtue" culture profoundly shapes their aesthetic inclinations. The study indicates that cultural segregation, formed in specific environments, operates through cultural consciousness or self-discipline to shape collective aesthetic tastes within a given regional and contextual group.

**Keywords:** Preschool children; Aesthetic preferences; Cultural segregation; Aesthetic taste

## 1. Introduction

Aesthetic preference is a psychological and emotional tendency that arises from a person's cognitive perception of beauty in things. It is an important dimension for understanding the particularity and complexity of aesthetics and art. It is a certain aggregation and manifestation form of aesthetic taste and discernment (Li, 2018). Cognitively, it mainly involves the two core aesthetic concepts of "beauty" and "ugliness". Emotionally, it mainly involves the two emotional behavior states of "acceptance" and "rejection". Narrowly speaking, aesthetic preference is influenced by physiological characteristics, individual experiences, and environmental influences, and belongs to a personalized taste or preference. However, from a broad perspective, it also has a common - tendency of specific groups due to similar social experiences, cultural inheritances, and the use of a common language (Lima, 1995). Especially when a certain thing is accepted or rejected by the public as a widespread communication medium, the common - preference of the group is particularly obvious, which inevitably involves the aesthetic group characteristics such as the geographical and cultural nature of the aesthetic subject. In 2023, in China, the illustration character images in primary school students' learning materials did not meet the aesthetic standards of Chinese people, which caused intense discussion and even resistance among the Chinese people. This has aroused our enthusiasm for exploring the issues of aesthetic tastes and preferences of groups rather than individuals. In addition, the "Sesame Street" series of children's programs produced by Sesame Workshop in the United States has been widely spread in many countries around the world. Since it entered the Chinese media market in 1984, it has had a wide - ranging impact on Chinese children. As a product of foreign culture and art, we are curious about the preferences of Chinese children, their standards for judging beautiful images and values. This has inspired our desire to explore the issues of human cultural aesthetics in a cross - cultural context. For the above reasons, we used 16 images from Sesame Street Muppets as research materials and surveyed 1,082 preschool children aged 3-6 from different regions in China. The purpose is to understand the group aesthetic preferences and tastes of Chinese children for cartoon images, reveal the reasons for their preference, and further reveal the impact of culture on children's aesthetic judgments and value orientations. This provides references and thoughts for relevant researchers to examine and select various forms and contents of beauty from the perspective of the co - existence and extensive communication of multiple cultures in the

context of globalization.

### 1.1 Theoretical Background

Aesthetic preference focuses on the question of what factors make an object considered beautiful. Research on this issue mainly focuses on two aspects: one is the universality of aesthetics, that is, whether there is a common standard or form for human understanding of beauty that transcends cultural segregation, such as symmetry (Huang et al., 2018; Jin, 2022; Mancini et al., 2005), color saturation (Cutting & Brunick, 2023). Aesthetics has objectivity and commonality. Researchers in this category believe that "universal aesthetic patterns (aesthetic preferences that are valid for people in every culture) do exist. For objects that conform to these patterns, everyone will make a judgment of beauty" (Wolfgong & Wang, 2010). For example, Kant, a representative figure of Western traditional aesthetics, proposed long ago that although everyone has their own unique taste (sensory taste), this unique taste cannot be the basis for aesthetic judgment. The universality of pleasure in aesthetic judgment is only manifested subjectively. "A judgment is called aesthetic (sensory) precisely because its determining ground is not a concept, but the feeling of the unanimity (of inner sense) in the play of the mind's faculties, insofar as this unanimity can be felt" (Kant, 2002). Aesthetic taste represents an ability of the inner sense, and this ability, which forms the basis of aesthetic judgment, is a pure form that has universal pleasure without relying on concepts, embodying a perceptual judgment of form rather than a perceptual judgment of matter (Duan, 2021). The second is the particularity of aesthetics, that is, human aesthetic judgments or preferences are the result of being influenced by specific aesthetic subject factors, such as specific ethnic groups, regions, history, culture, experiences, etc., rather than the objective factors of the art works themselves. For example, as Vygotsky believed, art is not an isolated expression of personal emotions, but a product of social and historical conditions. The form and content of art works are rooted in a specific social and historical cultural background, and the form of expression of the works is inseparable from the social and historical background (Lima, 1995). Researchers in this category believe that beauty and ugliness, likes and dislikes are determined by the subjective cognitive and emotional factors of the aesthetic subject regarding the hidden historical and cultural background behind the works. Aesthetic preference has subjectivity and differences. The issue of the universality and particularity of human aesthetic preferences has always been a focus of debate among philosophers, aestheticians, anthropologists, and artists.

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, a group of scholars represented by the famous German psychophysicist Fechner opened up the precedent of experimental aesthetics. The focus of research on the preferences for various art images shifted from speculation to empirical research, attempting to use scientific methods to reveal the commonalities and differences in aesthetic preferences. Regarding children's aesthetic preferences, in the early 20th century, some researchers began to use the methods of experimental psychology to explore issues related to children's aesthetic preferences. The British scholar Valentine (1913) summarized the landmark research results of some psychologists and aestheticians on children's preferences for the forms, compositions, and colors of art works during this period in his book "The Experimental Psychology of Beauty" (Valentine, 1991). After the middle of the 20th century, research on children's aesthetic preference psychology increased sharply. For example, Gardner (1970) studied the development process of children's aesthetic perception of paintings from birth to the age of 20. Steinberg and Deloache (1986) studied the perception of painting styles by preschool children. Callaghan and Rochat (2003) studied children's preferences for artists' styles. The focus of research during this period was on the age - related characteristics of children's aesthetic preferences for static art works (paintings, illustrations) from a psychological perspective. In China, influenced by Western research on children's aesthetic psychological preferences, since the middle of the 20th century, some psychology researchers have successively carried out research on children's aesthetic preferences for the shapes, colors, and styles of static art works such as paintings (Chen & Wang, 1965; Kong, 2016; Li, 1995; Ma, 2016; Yang, 2022; Zhang, 1993) and children's book illustrations (Ma, 2017; Zhu, 2005). However, looking at the research on children's aesthetic preferences before the 21st century, research on static art works and psychological factors such as age, gender, and personality that affect aesthetic preferences dominated. Researchers focused on aesthetic tastes beyond cultural segregation, and the research topic was the psychological commonalities of aesthetics, that is, which kind of beauty is more easily accepted by children. Empirical research on the group cultural psychology of human aesthetics was on the periphery.

However, in the 21st century, with the rapid development of modern information technology, new arts such as film, television, and animation have been widely spread globally. On the one hand, this has caused the focus of research on children's aesthetic preferences to shift from static to dynamic art works. On the other hand, it has also aroused people's enthusiasm for anthropological and cultural research in aesthetics. Viewing and accepting the beauty of things from different cultural backgrounds from a broader and multi - dimensional perspective, and regarding aesthetic preference as a theory for exploring the relationship between aesthetics and culture, and examining and accepting various forms and contents of beauty from the perspective of the co - existence and extensive communication of multiple cultures in the context of globalization have become a trend in current aesthetic preference research. Facing the numerous and changing forms of aesthetics and art, we still need to carefully examine and explore their internal relatively stable cultural consciousness and states (Xiang, 2018). Aesthetic culturology, on this basis, with the help of thinking about context issues, explores the formation reasons of specific aesthetic preferences, and points out the characteristics that universality and contextuality are unified in aesthetic preferences and are both restricted by social factors (Lian, 2016). In contemporary society, art, as a form of cultural capital, has integrated into cultural psychology, emotions, and experiences from the production and dissemination mechanisms, and has evolved into a new form of aesthetic experience. This form of aesthetic experience is playing an increasingly important role, and at the same time, it makes the role of aesthetic taste and

its cultural segregation more obvious. The relationship between the two is two - way, reflecting the new changes in contemporary aesthetic production relations. These new changes are precisely the content that contemporary aesthetic research needs to seriously address (Duan, 2021). In fact, today's aesthetic anthropologists are very cautious in their exploration and use of the concept of "universality". They pay more attention to examining the local individual aesthetic experiences and avoid falling into mechanical discussions about the general nature of aesthetics. This is the necessity of researching the particularity of aesthetic preferences (Lian, 2016).

## 1.2 The Current Study

As mentioned above, with the rise of multimedia communication, the research on children's aesthetic preferences has shifted from static art works to dynamic art, and the cultural aesthetic consciousness in aesthetic preference research has received increasing attention from scholars. Some Chinese researchers are no exception. In recent years, some have studied the current situation of 5 - 6 - year - old children's preferences for cartoons (Duan, 2008), as well as the aesthetic preference characteristics of cartoons suitable for preschool children (Zheng, 2010). In terms of aesthetic cultural comparison, Xiong (2007) compared the differences in the shaping of Chinese and foreign cartoon images. Zhang (2009) compared the attention of preschool children when watching Chinese and American cartoons. In terms of children's preferences for animated character images, some researchers have also started to explore (Fang et al., 2017; Zhang, 2016). However, a review of the literature shows that in current Chinese research on children's aesthetic preferences, there is relatively little research on the preferences for character images in foreign animated programs. In addition, most of the research measures the character image preferences of children after they watch animated programs. This kind of research is easily affected by factors such as the story scenario content in the image narrative, and cannot simply examine the beauty of the character images themselves. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the aesthetic preferences of children in the shaping of animated images from the perspective of static images of pure character image design, in order to reveal the cultural aesthetic issues behind the preferences for character images in animations. For this purpose, in this study, we focused on examining the aesthetic preferences of 3 - 6 - year - old Chinese children for 16 Muppet images created by Sesame Workshop in the United States. There are two main reasons: First, China is one of the countries with the longest history in the world. After thousands of years, a profound regional historical culture has been formed. From the perspective of human aesthetic culturology, this may subtly affect the aesthetic preferences of contemporary Chinese children. Second, choosing the static Muppet images created by Sesame Workshop as the aesthetic research object is because exploring the aesthetic preferences of Chinese children through such foreign art products is more likely to reveal the cultural differences, aesthetic tastes, and cross - cultural issues in art communication. Sesame Workshop, a non - profit educational institution in the United States, is now constantly developing, innovating, and spreading its programs for children in more than 150 countries around the world. In 1984, the Sesame Street program "Big Bird in China" co - produced by China and the United States premiered on Chinese TV stations. After 2010, Sesame Workshop created some series of programs, which were jointly broadcast on the Children's Channel of Shanghai Media Group, and of Guangdong Radio and Television Station. According to statistics, currently, more than 16 million Chinese preschool children and nearly 30 million mothers (with children aged 4 - 9) have watched "Big Bird's World". However, despite the increasing influence of "Sesame Street" in China, research on the specific impact of these art images on Chinese children and their cultural aesthetic value is relatively scarce. With the acceleration of the globalization process, foreign culture has an increasingly profound impact on Chinese children. Especially programs like "Sesame Street" with educational significance, their dual roles in cultural communication and aesthetic education cannot be ignored. In - depth exploration of the acceptance, cultural adaptability, and educational effects of these images among Chinese children not only helps to understand the dissemination mechanism of foreign culture in China, but also provides valuable references for the production of future children's educational programs. Therefore, in view of the rapid spread of Sesame Street art image works in China and the lack of relevant research, it is necessary to deeply explore their greater impact and educational value on Chinese children and even a wider range of international children from the perspective of cultural aesthetics, in order to reveal the aesthetic culture and educational suitability issues in the introduction and dissemination of foreign children's cartoon character images in China. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. Which are the most liked and least liked images among the 16 Sesame Street Muppets for 3 - 6 - year - old Chinese children?
2. What are the reasons for their preferences?
3. What aesthetic factors are behind children's preferences? Is their aesthetic taste affected by cultural segregation?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Participants

A total of 1,082 preschool children from five regions in China, including Changsha in Hunan province (43 children), Chongqing (200 children), Hezhou in Guangxi province (204 children), Karamay in Xinjiang province (200 children), Ningbo in Zhejiang province (240 children), and Wuhan in Hubei (195 children). By age, there were 162 children under 48 months old, 340 children aged 49 - 60 months, 347 children aged 61 - 72 months, and 233 children over 72 months old. Girls accounted for 47.22%.

### 2.2 Research Materials

Sixteen Muppet images, namely Elmo, Big Bird, Cookie Monster, Bert, Ernie, Oscar, Count, Zoe, Grover, Rosita,

Prairie, Snuffy, HuHu Zhu, Little Plum, Lily, and Abby, from the Sesame Street program (Figure 1). These 16 images are the main characters of Sesame Workshop on the Chinese screen (see the official website of Sesame Street China for details).



**Figure 1.** Sixteen Muppet Images from the Sesame Street Program

### 2.3 Measurement Procedure and Data Analyses

Institutional Review Board of the second author's institution approved the study (IRB ID: #3283). This study followed the ethical procedures and met the ethical norms and standards. To assess the preferences of 1,082 preschool children from different regions of China toward the 16 Sesame Street Muppet images, the study employed a self-designed interactive computer program. The design of the program primarily considered three aspects. First, the attention span of young children. To help children better compare and select their preferred images, the number of characters presented at one time should not be excessive. Therefore, presenting only two images at a time for comparison was deemed the most manageable approach. Second, if children were to compare the images in pairs, selecting the most preferred one from 16 characters would require multiple rounds of comparisons. This would make it highly challenging for researchers to manage and arrange the image cards, as well as to score the selected image cards. Automating this process via a computer program significantly improved efficiency. Third, this study involved thousands of children across six regions in China, with dozens of data collectors participating. Explaining and training data collectors on the research procedures, while ensuring high-quality data collection, was a substantial task. A computer program allowed for rapid standardization of research procedures across different regions.

The research procedure resembled the tournament format of the Football World Cup (Figure 2). Children independently selected their preferences among 16 Muppet images. In the first round, the 16 images were randomly divided into eight pairs, with each pair consisting of two images. One pair appeared on the screen each time, and the participant chose the one image they preferred. They provided reasons for their selection (liking) and for not choosing the other image (disliking). Each selected image received 1 point, while unselected images received 0 points. In the second round, the eight images that scored 1 point were again presented in pairs for children to choose from. Similarly, the eight images that scored 0 points were also presented in pairs for selection. Again, selected images received 1 point, while unselected ones received 0 points. The third and fourth rounds repeated this process, with images of the same score being paired for preference selection. After four rounds of comparison, an image with 4 points (the image that was selected in each comparison) represented the child's most preferred character, while an image with 0 points (the image that was never selected) represented the least preferred.

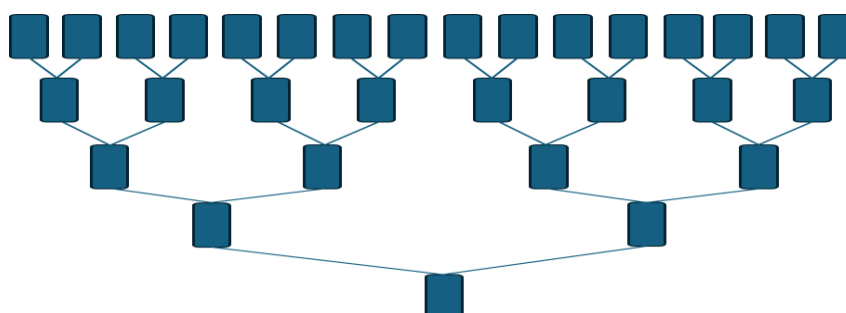


**Figure 2.** Preference Selection Procedure

Children's reasons for liking or disliking the images were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Following thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), two researchers familiarized themselves with all transcripts and independently conducted preliminary coding, assigning a "code" to each reason provided by the children. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Subsequently, the researchers grouped related codes into themes.

If thematic inconsistencies arose, further discussions ensured agreement. Each code was assigned to only one theme, with all codes incorporated into the thematic structure. The identified themes were then reviewed and defined. Finally, the results of the thematic analysis were presented. This manuscript was originally written in Chinese, DeepSeek (2024) was used to support the English translation and editing process. After using this AI tool, the researchers critically reviewed and edited the content as needed.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Most Favorite and Least Favorite Sesame Street Muppet Images among Chinese Preschoolers

The percentage of the number of preschoolers' preference choices for 16 Sesame Street Muppet images was calculated among 1,082 preschoolers from five regions (east, west, south, north, and central parts of China). The results are as follows (see Table 1):

**Table 1.** Chinese Preschool Children's Most and Least Preferred Sesame Street Muppet Images (%)

| Character      | Most Preferred | Character      | Least Preferred |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Lily           | 16.91          | Count          | 27.82           |
| Prairie        | 13.40          | Oscar          | 15.62           |
| Abby           | 11.74          | Snuffy         | 10.07           |
| Zoe            | 9.52           | Abby           | 6.29            |
| Elmo           | 7.39           | Ernie          | 5.55            |
| Big Bird       | 5.92           | Bert           | 5.08            |
| Cookie Monster | 4.53           | Prairie        | 4.71            |
| Oscar          | 4.34           | Huhuzhu        | 4.71            |
| Bert           | 4.16           | Zoe            | 3.42            |
| Rosita         | 4.07           | Little Plum    | 3.14            |
| Huhuzhu        | 3.97           | Rosita         | 2.87            |
| Count          | 3.79           | Cookie Monster | 2.77            |
| Snuffy         | 3.70           | Grover         | 2.59            |
| Ernie          | 2.07           | Elmo           | 2.04            |
| Little Plum    | 2.03           | Big Bird       | 2.03            |
| Grover         | 2.01           | Lily           | 1.29            |

It can be seen from Table 1 that the three most favorite character images among Chinese preschoolers are Lily (16.91%), Prairie (13.4%), and Abby (11.74%) in sequence (see Figure 3); the least favorite character images are Count (27.82%), Oscar (15.62%), and Snuffy (10.07%) (see Figure 4). Among them, the acceptance and rejection of Lily are extremely consistent in the opposite direction. That is, Lily is the character that children like the most and also the least hated. From the analysis of the polar correspondence between like and dislike, it can be seen that the character image of Lily is the only character with the highest acceptance and no objections among Chinese preschoolers. However, the polar correspondence between other favorite and least favorite characters does not show completely consistent characteristics. There are uneven deviations in the comparison between the two poles, that is, the phenomenon of aesthetic contrast (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Rank Discrepancy in Polarized Preferences Among Chinese Preschool Children toward 16 Images

| Character      | Ranking of Most Preferred | Character | Ranking of Least Preferred |
|----------------|---------------------------|-----------|----------------------------|
| Lily           | 1                         | -1        | 0                          |
| Prairie        | 2                         | -10       | -8                         |
| Abby           | 3                         | -13       | -10                        |
| Zoe            | 4                         | -8        | -4                         |
| Elmo           | 5                         | -3        | 2                          |
| Big Bird       | 6                         | -2        | 4                          |
| Cookie Monster | 7                         | -5        | 2                          |
| Oscar          | 8                         | -15       | -7                         |
| Bert           | 9                         | -11       | -2                         |
| Rosita         | 10                        | -6        | 4                          |

|             |    |     |    |
|-------------|----|-----|----|
| Huhuzhu     | 11 | -9  | 2  |
| Count       | 12 | -16 | -4 |
| Snuffy      | 13 | -14 | -1 |
| Ernie       | 14 | -12 | 2  |
| Little Plum | 15 | -7  | 8  |
| Grover      | 16 | -4  | 12 |

*Note.* In the "Least Preferred Characters" column, smaller negative values indicate weaker dislike (i.e., relatively higher preference). The "Rank Discrepancy Score" represents the ordinal difference between most- and least-preferred rankings - larger values denote higher preference inconsistency, while smaller values reflect greater preference consistency. A score of 0 indicates perfect preference alignment.

It can be seen from Table 2 that the ranking of the preference degree of a certain image by the entire sample cannot find a corresponding position at the other end of the rejection degree ranking, like the ranking of Lily. That is, there is no corresponding consistency (the reverse difference value is 0), indicating obvious complex differences in the preferences of the overall sample. The deviation values of Abby, Grover, Little Plum, Prairie, etc. are all more than 8 rank positions, with a relatively high degree of preference inconsistency. The above results suggest that the aesthetic preferences of Chinese preschoolers have both group consistency and group complexity and multi-facetedness. Children's demographic factors, such as gender, age, personality characteristics, cognitive level, family and preschool life experiences, as well as cultural characteristics of different regions, societies, and ethnic groups, may all affect children's aesthetic preferences and tendencies.



**Figure 3.** The Three Most Preferred Images



**Figure 4.** The Three Least Preferred Images

### 3.2 Reasons for Preschoolers' Selection of Character Image Preferences

Through the thematic analysis of interview recordings, there are thirteen categories of reasons for children's likes and dislikes of Sesame Street characters: facial features (e.g., "It smiles happily." / "Its eyes look scary."), movements/postures (e.g., "It's running."), colors (e.g., "It's red." / "I don't like blue."), can be easily defined (e.g., "It's a tiger." / "I don't know what it is."), physical body features (e.g., "Its big belly is very cute." / "It's too short."), costumes/props (e.g., "It's holding a magic wand."), facial features (e.g., "Its nose is very interesting."), reality/normality (e.g., "Its hands are too long."), generally internal characteristics (e.g., "It's very simple and honest." / "It's too gloomy."), generally external characteristics (e.g., "It's very beautiful."), personal life experiences (e.g., "My grandma is of the rooster zodiac."), gender (e.g., "Because it's a boy."), and no clear reasons. The top three reasons of Chinese preschoolers' preferences for the Muppet images are physical body features, costumes or props, and facial features in order, as shown in Table 3:

**Table 3.** Three Reasons for Chinese Preschoolers' Image Preferences (%)

| Preferred | Physical body features | Costumes or Props | Facial features |
|-----------|------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Most      | 21.66                  | 20.43             | 12.00           |
| Least     | 18.33                  | 18.16             | 18.16           |

Table 3 shows that whether Chinese preschoolers like or dislike an image, their reasons for selection are relatively consistent. First of all, it shows the cognitive characteristics of this age group, that is, they pay attention to the overall concrete visual characteristics of the observed image, namely, the physical body features and costumes or prop. Although the percentage differences of these two characteristics are not large, they are ranked the same in both the favorite and least favorite preferences. Therefore, they can be clearly divided into two categories. The physical body features are the first factor in the selection, and the costumes or props are the second factor. When Chinese preschoolers compare two images, their observations of the facial features vary significantly due to their emotions of like or dislike. When they like an image, children pay relatively little attention to the facial details (only accounting for 12%), but when they dislike an image, more children seem to be easily attracted by some facial feature details (accounting for 18.86%), such as appearance, smile, eyes, etc. To a certain extent, this shows that the obvious characteristics presented by the artistic images are the main reasons affecting preschoolers' aesthetic preferences. Because the emotions of liking or disliking inspired by visual sensations will further affect the degree of detail of children's observations of image characteristics. Aesthetic preference is not only an objective stimulus of an object (artwork) to a subject (viewer), but also a subjective reflection of the subject on the object. Relevant research shows that there are many factors influencing aesthetic preferences, and it is the combined influence and comprehensive effect of these factors that determine people's aesthetic orientation (Zhu, 2005). However, the objective factors in the creation of artistic images, such as artistic characteristics like modeling, color, style, action, expression, and details, are the visual stimulus elements that affect children's aesthetic preferences or tastes. Of course, as an artistic work designed as a character image, these elements are not presented in isolation but are comprehensively manifested in the overall character image. During the survey process, we found that when preschoolers examine images and compare them, there are two layers of scenarios simultaneously influencing their aesthetic reasoning and judgment. One layer is that the two images serve as scenarios for each other and as the basis for judgment through concrete foiling. This enables children to observe art elements such as color, modeling, style, expression, and action in a comparative way. It provides intuitive conditions for children to explain the reasons for their preferences and also offers verification evidence for researchers to observe together with children, facilitating a better understanding of children's reasoning. The other layer of scenarios is non - intuitive but may play a more crucial role in children's selection process. This is the socialization of aesthetics in children's growth experiences. Although preschoolers' aesthetic viewpoints may vary from person to person, with significant differences due to each individual's temperament, personality, life experiences, especially family upbringing, the common experiences of growing up in the same social - cultural environment will make children's thinking environments about people and things, that is, their psychological activities and representational tools, including many aesthetic psychological tools, converge. As Vygotsky believed, aesthetic experience transcends individual perception and generates psychological effects through the interaction of form and content. Art, as a "social - emotional technology," can convey emotions in historical and social contexts and shape the emotional lives of individuals and collectives (cited from Lima,., 1995; Larrain & Haye, 2020). In terms of their age, there are not only many overlaps in their preferences but also similar explanations for their judgments. For example, most children (regardless of gender) regard the favorite Prairie and Abby as little girls because "she is wearing a beautiful blue skirt" and "girls should wear skirts to look good." This reason for judging gender and preferences for beauty and ugliness based on clothing is somewhat related to the gender awareness and specific social - role identity that children develop as they grow older. To some extent, it may be regarded as the synchronous development of children's individual and collective emotions in aesthetics.

Why do children take physical body features as the primary factor when making choices about liking and disliking? This may be related to the realism and concreteness of the modeling and style embodied by the characters. In terms of modeling, some studies have shown that children aged 3 - 6 prefer artistic images with anthropomorphic features and those that are closer to the structural characteristics (head, limbs, eyes, torso) of human beings. The more the content of a work is close to reality, and the more familiar and concrete the object characteristics are, the more likely it is to attract children's attention (Ma, 2016; Zhang, 2016). In this study, the three most - liked characters by children all have this characteristic (see Figure 3). In the interviews, the vast majority of children almost all referred to Lily as a "little tiger" and regarded Prairie and Abby as "little girls" or "little fairies." However, the three least - liked anthropomorphic characters have low realism. Children cannot make specific references. They either say it's a "monster" or a "ghost," or they reply "I don't know what it is." It is difficult for children to match them with certain people or objects in their real - life experiences. In terms of style, although the three images that children like are not real and specific people, they all have a high degree of reality. Their external forms and clothing are relatively close to the main image characteristics that animals (tigers) and people (little girls) should have in children's experiences. In contrast, the three least - liked characters have surreal characteristics such as strange images (hyper - concrete human or animal features) and abnormal behaviors (sitting in a trash can against reality). This shows that physical body features that conform to reality are the main factors in Chinese preschoolers' preferences. However, the results of this study are inconsistent with some relevant research

conclusions. For example, Fang and his colleagues (2017) examined the aesthetic preferences of 4 - 6 - year - old preschoolers for virtual dynamic cartoon character images on screen and found that preschoolers prefer exaggerated and anthropomorphic images to realistic - style characters. This may be because, as mentioned before, narrative dynamic character images are often given certain idealized character - personality characteristics in stories, while pure static image pictures are less affected by this factor.

Costumes and props are the second - most important reason for preschoolers' preferences, which may be related to the characters' clothing and colors. In terms of color, some previous studies have shown that preschoolers like images with rich colors and high color saturation the most and are less interested in images with monotonous, dull, and disharmonious colors (Cutting & Brunick, 2023; Gardner, 1970; Ma, 2016; Steinberg & Deloache, 1986; Zhang, 1993; Li, 1995). However, we believe that color saturation is only a stimulating factor that attracts visual attention. In terms of image preferences, color determines whether a child likes an image as a whole perception. Early research has proven that after the age of 3, children have an advantage in color abstraction. They regard color as a general attribute of things (Chen & Wang, 1965). This shows that at this stage, children's color preferences are related to other factors of objects, such as actions and gender, and it is a kind of identity abstraction. In this study, the clothing colors of the three most - liked characters by children are mainly yellow, pink, purple - red, light blue, and light green. The colors are bright and the collocations are harmonious. In contrast, the colors of the three least - liked characters are darker, such as Count with black as the main color, Oscar with gray as the main color, and Snuffy with dark brown. And except for Snuffy, whose color is relatively single and unified, the color collocations of the other two characters are diverse and have obvious differences. In terms of costume style, for example, among the three characters that children like, Lily is in "tiger-skin" style, and the other two characters are dressed in little-girl-style skirts, shoes, and socks. They are highly anthropomorphic and are close to the clothing styles of people in preschoolers' daily lives. Among the least - liked characters, Count's triangular cape, Oscar sitting in a "dirty" trash can with a trash-can lid on his head, and other such clothing styles and scenarios may not conform to children's existing and fixed "good-looking" real-image models, resulting in their dislike. Some studies have confirmed that children prefer works with a realistic style to images that are beyond their real - life experiences (Kong, 2016). In addition, through interviews, it was found that some decorative items and props are also the reasons for preschoolers' preference choices. For example, the butterfly flower on Lily's head and the "little star wand" in Abby's hand. These small decorations may be more likely to stimulate the interest of children with similar clothing preferences. As some researchers have argued, "Aesthetics and art are inseparable from their (local people's) daily lives. Aesthetic experience is a part of their life experience" (Fan, 2007). In daily life, it is not difficult to find that preschoolers are very interested in decorations such as hairpins, headbands, hanging chains, bells, and stickers.

Facial features are one of the reasons for children's preferences. In the design of art works, some expressions of characters, such as eye - gazing, hand - gesturing, and smiling, have the emotional function of communicating with readers or viewers (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006). Character images with obvious active and warm communication features are often more likely to attract the attention and love of children. In the designs of the three most-liked characters by children, they all have warm greetings, bright smiles, and bright and expressive eyes. This may bring them closer to children and make children feel a sense of friendliness, which is why children like them. In contrast, in the other three least-liked characters, the expression and action features in this regard are not obvious. Snuffy hardly has any "warm" emotional actions. In terms of eyes, the three least-liked images also make children feel "wired". These "wired" expressions and insufficiently "warm" performances may be one of the reasons why Chinese preschoolers have difficulty accepting them emotionally. To a certain extent, this shows that the emotional expressions of character images are an important basis for preschoolers' preferences.

Of course, it is undeniable that the reasons for aesthetic preferences are not limited to these three aspects, and it is impossible for one aspect to completely determine them. For preschoolers, beauty may be just a feeling, or even an "intuition" for which they do not need or cannot explain the reasons. Especially for younger children, when asked why in an interview, their answers like "I just like it" or "I just don't like this" may be due not only to limited language - expression abilities but also to the fact that they may already have some form of gestalt model in their minds. As Werner (1957) proposed, their cognition is still in the stage of primitive abstraction, belonging to the category of perception, with two gestalt patterns of shape and color. As for whether the abstracted one is actually color or shape depends on which one is more suitable (Chen & Wang, 1965). This gestalt-style "beauty" pattern may be a direct reflection of their life experiences. It may also be due to the complex cultural context behind it, which will be further discussed below.

#### 4. Discussion

The study on the preferences of 1,082 children aged 3 - 6 from different regions of China for 16 Sesame Street Muppet images shows that Chinese preschoolers mainly select their most-liked and least-liked images based on concrete external characteristics such as physical body features, costumes or props, and facial features. However, where do the aesthetic orientations behind these reasons come from? As Damme (2015) emphasized, "Research aims to obtain an insightful analysis of culture, rather than merely providing a descriptive report of facts... Observers, to some extent, need to go beyond the 'level of interpretation' presented by informants". Valentine (1991) once proposed that aesthetic preference might just be an instinctive physiological reaction. But as he also believed, with the increase of individual experiences and the enrichment of associations, this physiological effect will gradually weaken and be replaced by individual social factors, personality factors, and ethnic cultural factors. Therefore, we need to look beyond the surface

phenomena of children's aesthetic preferences and explore the essence of aesthetic culture from the perspectives of aesthetic anthropology and cultural aesthetics.

#### 4.1 Individual Taste and Cultural Distinction

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociocultural scholar, believed that "Taste is not only a manifestation of cultural distinction but also has an exclusive property. Cultural needs are the product of education. All cultural practices (visiting museums, concerts, exhibitions, reading, etc.), as well as preferences in literature, painting, and music, are closely related to the level of education (measured by academic qualifications or years of study), and secondly, to social origin" (Bourdieu, 2015). Obviously, Bourdieu's aesthetic concept reflects differences and theoretical divergences from the aesthetic research path since Kant. Generally speaking, it is a divergence between the internal subjectivity concept of aesthetic taste and the sociological distinction of aesthetic taste. To some extent, this can explain why children in the preschool stage have as many as nine reasons for preference choices in our study. It can also explain the inconsistent differences in the ranking of preferences for 16 images (see Table 2). Because these children are from five different regions in China, although we did not conduct detailed demographic classification and statistics here, there must be differences in cultural capital and aesthetic experiences among individuals due to local customs, family factors, educational levels, etc., which in turn affect their aesthetic tastes and reasons for preferences. Of course, in this study, we only explored the existence of this taste difference phenomenon and did not deeply reveal the degree of its impact on the aesthetic tastes of different children from the perspective of cultural capital. This still needs to be verified through further empirical research.

#### 4.2 Group Preferences and Cultural Traits

Although cultural distinctions can lead to differences and particularities among different aesthetic individuals, it is no easy task to transcend "cultural boundaries" for different groups. Humans living in vastly different societies have more unique aesthetic expressions of their own ethnic groups in addition to shareable aesthetic experiences. There are still significant cultural boundaries in aesthetic preferences among groups, making them more relative (Duan, 2021). We believe that cultural traits are the main factors influencing group aesthetic preferences. As unique and traditional characteristics or traits of a certain group or society, cultural traits can reflect the common cultural characteristics and values of this group in history, morality, religion, customs, art, etc. Cultural traits are a cultural symbol that is commonly recognized and respected by the group. In this study, the special preferences of Chinese preschoolers for puppet images such as Lily, Prairie, and Abby (Figure 3), as well as their strong rejection of Count, Oscar, and Snuffy (Figure 4), may be explained by the cultural traits formed in the long history of the Chinese nation.

China has a history of human civilization spanning five thousand years. The cultural traits formed over a long period not only affect people's lifestyles but also their aesthetic ways. From the comparison of the three most-liked and three least-liked character images by Chinese children, the influence of the cultural traits of virtue on aesthetic preferences is clearly evident. In this study, the three images liked by children all present "positive" images praised by the Chinese, such as being cute, warm, and enthusiastic - with lovely forms, warm colors, and enthusiastic behaviors. Conversely, the disliked images all present "strange" and "evil" that are unacceptable in Chinese culture. For example, in the interviews, some children thought that Count's image was "as strange as a ghost." Oscar was considered "dirty" because "How can he sit in the trash can?" And Snuffy was seen as "ugly," "so ugly that he looks like a monster." Obviously, there is a call of virtue for aesthetics. Francis Hutcheson, a British Enlightenment thinker known as the father of modern aesthetics, discussed the relationship between human aesthetics and virtue, believing that "When an event or object is regarded as good or evil, it is based on the pleasant or unpleasant perception that our nature has of it. Virtue stems from seeing the appropriate object and the character of moral goodness" (Hutcheson, 2004). He elevated people's perception of "beauty" from "external sensory perception" to "the proper perception of beauty by the mind" (Zhao, 2017). Among the three liked and disliked characters of Chinese children, the "positive - form" ideology in Chinese virtue - culture traits influences children's aesthetic preferences. Whether the image is "proper" subtly affects children's preferences. In the Chinese cultural context and education, "uprightness" is an embodiment of personality. For example, children are taught from an early age to be "upright" in character, "decent" in image, and "proper" in behavior. These personified traditional cultural traits are passed down from generation to generation and become the so-called "beautiful" images in art works, which are subtly accepted by children. This may be the potential and invisible reason behind their preferences. It can also explain that there are aesthetic commonalities in group aesthetic preferences formed due to the influence of cultural traits.

#### 4.3 Aesthetic Contrast and Cultural Diversity

As mentioned before, there is a significant contrast between children's likes and dislikes in their preferences for certain images (see Table 2). For example, Abby, one of the three most-liked images by Chinese preschoolers, ranks the third among the "most-liked" images but the 13th among the 16 "least-liked" images. If the correspondence between like and dislike were consistent, it should be ranked the third among the disliked ones. The deviation between the two-pole choices reaches a difference of 10 rank positions (3-13=-10), showing a significant non-correspondence in preferences, that is, there is a controversy between "beauty" and "ugliness." The same goes for Grover (-12), Little Plum (-8), Prairie (-8), etc. What causes such a huge aesthetic contrast among children in the same Chinese cultural context? We believe that this may be related to the cultural diversity brought about by the development of modern media. As Ann Landi believed, "Even the most trained eye or the most cultivated art historian cannot determine which art will endure forever" (Landi, 2003). Nowadays, with the frequent cultural exchanges, the co - existence of diverse cultures is influencing the

changes and transformations of global aesthetic tastes. Animation is a form of entertainment and education that transcends age, culture, and national boundaries. Since the birth of the world's first animated film, Humorous Phases of Funny Faces by James Stuart Blackton in the United States in 1906, to modern 3D blockbusters, the history of animation has witnessed the birth of countless classic cartoon images. These images, with their unique features and personalities, have been widely exchanged among countries and attracted the hearts of numerous cross-border audiences. In China, with the development of the art market, a large number of foreign animations, advertisements, or static children's reading materials (such as picture books) have poured into the country. The aesthetic objects of children are no longer limited to Chinese-made art works, but have become more diverse and rich. In our research sample, these children must have been influenced by this diversified aesthetics. Therefore, it is quite normal for inconsistent aesthetic contrast phenomena to occur. Traditional aesthetic culture is also changing. The images of some art works with foreign cultural characteristics also affect their aesthetic views. Especially for those "neutral" character images, that is, elements such as modeling, color, composition, and scene that do not particularly conform to or violate the aesthetic standards of a specific culture, the aesthetic judgment of "beauty" and "ugliness" has also become diversified. A careful observation and analysis show that the four typical aesthetic-contrast images in our study, Abby, Grover, Little Plum, and Prairie, are not as "ugly" or "strange" as the three least-liked images by Chinese children (Figure 4). Therefore, it is reasonable to explain the inconsistent aesthetic preferences of children influenced by diversified aesthetic experiences. Thus, aesthetic research must go beyond the issues of art itself and deeply explore from multiple aspects such as the daily lives of aesthetic viewers, their perceptual attitudes, media culture, and the contradictions between aesthetic and anti-aesthetic experiences (Hu, 2001). Because this is an international era of the co-existence of diverse cultures. As an important part of human culture, the value and acceptance of any foreign art work need to be examined and explored from a multicultural perspective, and the aesthetics of children's art works is no exception.

## 5. Conclusion

The research results on the aesthetic preferences of 1,082 preschoolers aged 3-6 from different regions, families, and preschools in China show that when choosing their preferences for the 16 puppet images from the American Sesame Street program, Chinese preschoolers mainly rely on external characteristics such as action forms, costumes and props, and facial expressions to make their choices of the most-liked and least-liked images. Influenced by Chinese "virtue" culture, images with "positive" cultural traits such as proper forms, harmonious colors, smiling expressions, positive actions, and decent costumes are the reasons for them to choose the "most-liked" images. On the contrary, image elements with obvious "negative" traits, such as strange forms, indecent costumes, and peculiar expressions, are the most rejected. However, the study also finds that there is an aesthetic contrast phenomenon in children's aesthetic preferences. The same image shows inconsistent correspondences between the two poles of like and dislike. From the perspective of group aesthetics, there are commonalities in children's aesthetic preferences influenced by culture. Cultural distinctions affect not only individual aesthetic tastes but also group preferences. However, since this study is only an aesthetic-phenomenon research from the perspective of the aesthetic preferences of the Chinese children's group, and it does not deeply explore the aesthetic differences among these children in terms of region, age, gender, educational level, etc., it is impossible to extract the common aesthetic traits from the particular cases, which is a limitation of this study. In addition, the analysis of the influence of multiculturalism on the aesthetic-contrast phenomenon is only possible speculation. As some people have proposed, in the macro-perspective of aesthetics, the horizontal comparison and overall grasp of culture fully reflect the self-discipline of in-depth cultural research (Qiu, 2017). We may need to conduct some cross-cultural comparative studies, such as comparing the preferences of Chinese and American children for Sesame Street Muppet images, to truly reveal whether there are cultural distinctions behind group aesthetics.

## Data Availability Statement

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author upon request.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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