

# GENERATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHINESE POPULATIONS: A PRELIMINARY OBSERVATION

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# Generational Characteristics of the Chinese Populations: A Preliminary Observation

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The issue of intergenerational dynamics in China constitutes a significant challenge within Chinese society. Indeed, comprehending China and its societal intricacies necessitates an understanding of the characteristics inherent to individuals across different generational strata. This, however, proves to be an arduous task. Given that individuals typically assess and cognize based on personal experiences, transitioning from individual perspectives to a collective understanding entails a complex and inherently ambiguous cognitive process.

This paper represents a preliminary synthetic attempt from the perspective of the author's social experience. The focal criteria for evaluation in this paper encompass social attributes, societal stratification, performance during the Cultural Revolution, urbanization, prevailing social trends, and characteristics of social education. It is imperative to acknowledge that the observational and integrative methods employed for these factors<sup>2</sup> may not comprehensively address all intergenerational issues, possibly lacking in comprehensiveness or accuracy. Nevertheless, serving as an aperture, it offers insight into the challenges posed by intergenerational dynamics and their profound impacts on the future, thereby potentially bearing its own value and significance.

The time division in this paper does not follow the conventional sociological definition of a 10-year interval. This is because the report is not concerned with studying specific time periods but rather focuses on generational categories and their macro-level manifestations, including their influence and roles in society. Given the strong interconnectedness and influences that exist within society, education, and families, arbitrarily dividing time into distinct periods is, in practice, a detrimental approach that does not align with real-world social dynamics. In simple terms, the research is about people, not time.

## The 1950s Generations:

This category can refer to those born roughly from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s, i.e., a generation that includes individuals who once participated in the national college entrance examination (known as "gaokao" in Chinese) during that period. This generation is predominantly comprised of intellectuals and graduates of prestigious universities. In my earlier days when I was at a research institution in China, my mentor was a graduate of Tsinghua University from that era, who happened to be the top scorer in the gaokao. As a minority of elites in the society, they maintained some connections with the older social order and often held themselves in high regard.

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<sup>1</sup> The article incorporates perspectives from colleagues at ANBOUND, including He Jun, Zhao Zhijiang, Yang Xite, among others. All colleagues involved in the research have been duly cited in the footnotes of the article.

<sup>2</sup> The primary methods employed by researchers are the observational method and the integrative method, aimed at synthesizing the macroscopic characteristics of society from a comprehensive perspective.

During that era, intellectuals were generally looked down upon. Within the social strata, the true elites were the most prominent "Second-Generation Reds", referring to sons and daughters of Chinese political elites of that era. They attended specialized schools and enjoyed exclusive provisions of food and commodities. Even in an era when owning a bicycle was a luxury for many, they possessed cars, had access to domestic helpers, and wore clothing befitting military officers. At an age where that was not long after the 1949 war, they still harbored a sense of pride. They received widespread respect within Chinese society at the time, clearly sensing their integral connection with the preceding generation. Furthermore, such elites had distinctive political lineages and social hierarchies.

During China's Cultural Revolution, this generation regarded inheriting their forebears' privileges as an entitlement. This was due to their deeply rooted sense of bloodline, and they considered it a fundamental societal bedrock. In fact, the Red Guards employed the concept of the bloodline to identify "counter-revolutionaries" in the heydays of the Cultural Revolution. From a socio-strata perspective, although intellectuals of this era often looked down upon workers and peasants, the privileged leadership stratum, in turn, scorned intellectuals and held all socio-political underprivileged in contempt.

This generation grew up during a period of intense political strife, and they possess an intimate understanding of the dynamics of power struggles in China. They matured within the context of these power movements, and are acutely aware that the interplay between "to lead and to be led" lies at the core of Chinese society, serving as a fundamental hallmark of social hierarchy. They took for granted the reality of gaining positions through power struggles and inheriting political legacies and saw it as the essence of the political game.

The 1950s generation in the Chinese society tends to be relatively extreme. They either aspired to be political leaders with absolute authority or found themselves having no other option but to be perpetually subservient political outcasts. There is scarcely a middle ground for them to tread, and they may even lack an understanding of rationality or moderation. In contemporary Chinese society, they essentially constitute the final revolutionary generation, who staunchly adhere to this somewhat idiosyncratic conviction.

During a particularly significant period of character formation, this generation underwent experiences unparalleled in China's history. Contrasted with their privileged predecessors of the Republican era, they lived through transformative social movements such as the relocation of urban youths to mountainous areas or farming villages<sup>3</sup> or the dismantling of the Gang of Four, and other upheavals, which profoundly shook their understanding of power and the system. These experiences enabled them to address political shortcomings that the previous generation could not fully resolve. They gained insights into societal knowledge and practices that Marxist-Leninist academic circles (including those of the former Soviet Union) failed to comprehend. Consequently, they not only acquired political confidence but also maintained unwavering political zeal and fervor.

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<sup>3</sup> The importance of this movement has been pointed out by ANBOUND's researcher He Jun.

It should be noted that they came of age during a relatively intense period characterized by political struggles in grassroots Chinese society. They possess a deeper understanding of such a society, with rules and techniques required for political survival than the 1960s generation. In the socially conservative environment of China's grassroots, within a conservative political system and traditional culture, they clearly observed the social disparities stemming from differences in educational levels and comprehended the driving forces behind these disparities. Consequently, they held a stronger conviction that they could influence the fundamental trends within Chinese society. It appears that the generation born in the 1950s displays considerable self-assuredness, which was led by a revolutionary aristocracy.

### **The 1960s Generation:**

The 1960s generation, in essence, spans from those born in the mid to late 1950s to the early 1970s. Growing up during the Mao era of population strategy, they had the understanding that they were unable to compete with other nations in terms of technology, hence for them, the best defense was China's vast population. Pursuing population growth therefore became a fundamental national policy. This led the generation born in the 1960s to become the most populous generation in modern Chinese history, making them the so-called "population dividend" of China, a term primarily referring to such a generation.

From a societal perspective, the most significant characteristic of this generation, in comparison to the previous one, was their experience of growing up in relatively humble circumstances. In general, they lacked the strong political elite sense of the preceding generation. Raised in a period of severe economic poverty, they belong to a generation that experienced prolonged scarcity. The lack of food and amenities, and even memories of famine where many starved to death, scarcity had deeply imprinted itself on their consciousness. Consequently, they were willing to exert the utmost effort to bring about change. They were more willing to pay the price for the prospect of enjoying material wealth and prosperity.

The main driving force behind China's reform and opening-up was the generation born in the 1960s. They formed the backbone of the country's labor force, spearheaded the expansion of entrepreneurship and businesses<sup>4</sup>, and served as the social foundation for Deng Xiaoping's policies. China's urbanization was also predominantly led by the 60s generation. They were both builders of cities and significant consumers. With abundant human resources and a strong work ethic, they turned China into the "world's factory". Simultaneously, they founded numerous enterprises, including many well-known publicly traded companies. In this sense, they emerged from poverty and sometimes were touted as the "Golden Generation" of China.

The objective reasons behind the creation of this miracle by this generation can be traced

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<sup>4</sup> This is called "xiaohai" in Chinese, literally "going to the sea". Breaking away from the original official system and state-owned enterprises, this generation sought independence, with the majority of them becoming entrepreneurs.

back to their formative years. During that period, China had just reinstated the gaokao examination. However, the enrollment rate for higher education was only between 1% to 4%. Therefore, their success was not primarily based on academic credentials or a formal college education. Instead, it was rooted in a strong work ethic, an East Asian-style pragmatism that encouraged innovation, and a marked open-mindedness different from traditional Chinese culture.

Such a generation whose formative years were immersed in the nascent phase of China's reform and opening-up policy was the one who reflected on the past, which gave them a sense of critical thinking. This is manifested in their grounded pragmatism, pioneering spirit, and instrumental role in catalyzing industrial and economic advancements. Furthermore, there were significant waves of international study and immigration, culminating in a receptivity towards Western ideas. They did not hold power in high regard as their predecessors; instead, the advent of the market economy taught them to understand the power and value of money. They became a generation of creators, and there are a multitude of reasons that drove their success.

### **The 1970s Generation:**

This category encompasses those born in the later years of the 1960s through the early 1980s. This generation came of age during a pivotal period in China. It was marked by China's economic ascent, coexisting with a peak in inflation, even to the extent that bank deposits carried interest<sup>5</sup>. This era coincided with a critical juncture in China's reform and opening-up policy experimental approach devoid of comprehensive top-down design<sup>6</sup>. Ultimately, China's social upheaval began to converge on Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China's reform and opening-up policy. Starting with a student movement that initiated the anti-privilege demands, the culmination of these events marked the eruption of the Tiananmen Incident in 1989. This event left an indelible imprint on the minds and characters of this generation, casting a lasting shadow of scars and trauma. They found themselves politically restricted and were prompted toward a trajectory focused on economic reform instead. Thus, the connotation and essence of reform in China transformed into a predominantly economic one.

Hence, the 1970s generation, who endured the aftermath of the incident of June 4, 1989, had been politically guided to primarily aspire to financial success. As a result, an era indifferent to politics finally descended upon China.

It is also this generation in China who initiated a legacy of pursuing financial success by any means. They simplified the broad historical context of reform and opening-up, disregarding the ideological heritage and thoughts of the previous generations. Their simple

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<sup>5</sup> At that time, bank deposits offered a dual interest rate system to control the effects of inflation. There was the nominal fixed-term interest and a "value preservation subsidy" interest. For example, taking a one-year fixed-term deposit expiring in January 1996, the annual value preservation subsidy rate was 11.31%, in addition to the fixed 10.98% interest, resulting in a total interest rate of 22.29%.

<sup>6</sup> In that era of Chinese politics, actual top-level design was not allowed, and reform was a form of privilege.

belief is that success is synonymous with financial achievements. This perception has had a profound and lasting consequence for China's future, extending far beyond the timespan of the 1970s.

The 1970s generation has already undergone standardized education. They diligently studied and participated in the college entrance examination, yet encountered unequal distribution of educational resources in both high school and university where conservatism prevailed in these institutions. This educational background led this generation to be more inclined to seek opportunities outside of the country, including studying abroad and immigration, making them a major part of China's wave of emigration. However, compared to the generation of the 1960s during the peak of childbirth, they have fewer opportunities and less space provided by society. While they still strive to compete, the reduced space provided by the era has led to increasing vulnerabilities. It has thus become challenging for them to achieve innovation through education. In most cases, they are a generation that tends to conform, with a limited degree of critical thinking. The possibility of starting businesses, especially compared to the previous generation, is significantly lower, resulting in fewer successful entrepreneurs among such a generation.

The 1970s generation, in contrast to the 1960s one, often appears more restrained. They have persistently encountered greater societal constraints, experiencing mounting pressures. While conforming to conventions, they also grapple with uncertainties about the future. Nonetheless, on the whole, this generation stands out as the most diligent in pursuing education within Chinese society, making them a more balanced generation within the societal structure.

### **The 1980s Generation:**

This generation, broadly referring to those born in the late 1970s to early 1990s, marked the true onset of a declining birthrate in China. They grew up in a period of affluence and rapid economic growth, experiencing significant improvements in their family living standards. Being the first generation of a single child in their households, they often received abundant attention from their families. Their parents would provide support as long as they excelled in their studies, which led to a noticeable trend of having fewer children in this generation. This trend has progressively intensified, giving rise to the perception of them as a generation reluctant to embrace full adulthood.

The Chinese society of this generation has gradually transformed into a highly structured and finely segmented one. There was a pervasive and increasingly stringent social order that ensured the upward trajectory of youth was tightly regulated and defined within society, obligating this generation to comply through various means. In almost every aspect, such a generation relies heavily on family support, making independence a challenging endeavor when compared to previous generations of Chinese people.

The 1980s generation encountered intense competition, though opportunities for success

were notably scarce. Consequently, they underwent significant shifts in mentality. On one hand, they sought stability, pursued fixed incomes or material comforts, and even aspired to become civil servants. The persuasion of a career in civil service, which, despite relatively low income, offers stability and security. On the other hand, they begin seeking ways to transform their lives on a broader scale, exploring various possibilities. Hence, those from other provinces migrate to Beijing without household registration there nor permanent places to stay, or they become what is known as "mortgage slaves". Despite dwindling opportunities with more hardships, this generation is often reluctant to follow in their parents' footsteps, particularly when it comes to engaging in strenuous work.

The generation born during this period received a comprehensive college education, and the rate of university admissions significantly increased. Yet at the same time, the difficulty of the college entrance exam has become notably lower. Despite having better educational conditions and reduced competition for admissions, this generation paradoxically started to read less, a trend that was reflected in the difficulties faced by the publishing industry in China at that time. As the only child in their families, their sense of both familial and social responsibility significantly diminished. Many relied solely on their parents for financial support. This generation, although relatively honest, represents the beginning of societal imbalances in Chinese society.

### **The 1990s Generation:**

The 1990s generation broadly refers to those born in the late 1980s to early 2000s. In addition to inheriting the flaws of the generation born in the 1980s, the most significant characteristic of this generation is the collective personality traits and preferences influenced by computer and mobile games, hence they are often called the "gaming generation". Starting in the late 20th century, the global game industry entered a period of tremendous growth, as the industry recognized the immense profit potential driven by the addictive nature of games. This industry boom had an inevitable impact on the lives of the 1990s generation. During that era, games became an integral part of their lives, profoundly affecting them. They had the means and opportunities to immerse themselves in the gaming world they loved, often preferring it over facing the real world.

They eagerly embraced online shopping, which catalyzed the e-commerce wave, leading it to become both an industry and lifestyle trend. Comparatively, this generation is more willing to shop at physical stores because of online shopping, an inclination that may be attributed to their experience with mobile technology. From their perspective, using a smartphone to scan QR codes for payments was "high-tech"<sup>7</sup> compared to paying with credit cards. Consequently, smartphones initially used mostly for gaming, now offer more opportunities for financial control for this generation.

The era dominated by the 1990s generation marked the peak of urbanization in China. A

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<sup>7</sup> Alipay, introduced by Alibaba and its founder Jack Ma, enjoys widespread use, even posing challenges to the stability of China's legal currency.

significant number of rural populations moved into cities, replacing the existing urban residents. The urban population, which was originally over a billion, saw a rapid increase to around 600 million people. Due to the rapid pace of population replacement, urban areas essentially became “ruralized”. Every year during the Chinese Spring Festival, the massive migration of people returning to their hometowns is a spectacular event that repeats annually, which also carries significant challenges. The vast scale and impact of urbanization in China provide an excellent opportunity and window for observation.

Urban growth invariably results in the appreciation of assets<sup>8</sup>. In China, due to this urban expansion, family wealth predominantly stemming from real estate has experienced a relatively swift upward trajectory. Consequently, some individuals have simplistically assumed that due to the continuous price increases, the value of these family assets remains sustainable. As a result, they are inclined to offer greater financial support to the 1990s generation without expectation of their contribution.

As a result, the 1990s generation in China is sometimes described as “giant babies” who refuse to grow up. In 2015, a female teacher in Henan casually quit her job, leaving behind a widely circulated resignation letter with a few words: “The world is so big, I want to explore it”. Following in the footsteps of this teacher, thousands were said to have found reasons to quit their jobs and explore the world. They are at times described as “trying their best to live an ordinary life”, which might be an accurate portrayal of that era's people.

This generation has rapidly become mainstream in society due to the pace of urbanization in China. Consequently, various aspects of Chinese society are currently showing increasingly severe signs of instability, all closely tied to the generation. They are the generation of imbalance.

The 1990s generation diverges from their predecessors, the 1980s generation, particularly with regard to their prevailing mindset. While the 1980s generation's sense of socio-economic disadvantage was still in the state of development, the 1990s generation, upon shifting their focus beyond the confines of computer games, came to the realization of the changing world, which has led to a distinct attitude of non-progressiveness. Notably, the 1990s generation exhibits a perceived entitlement to the acquisition of resources in the real world, just like in computer games, rather than an inclination towards contributing to society. They have disengaged from the traditional narrative of “contribution-reward”, a concept revered by preceding generations. The 1990s generation, sometimes termed as “gaming generation”, much prefers the virtual world to the real one, and a great portion of them has relinquished the pursuit of success defined in the traditional sense.

### **The 2000s Generation:**

The 2000s generation, encompassing those born from the late 1990s to around 2010, now largely in their twenties, faces an educational landscape in China significantly impacted by a

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<sup>8</sup> For the related theoretical background, see the book *Crisis Triangle* by Kung Chan.



sudden demographic decline due to the one-child policy. The education system is grappling with an unprecedented crisis as many institutions contend with dwindling student enrollments. Even those who manage to secure places in prestigious universities amid heightened competition may possess academic aptitude that only roughly corresponds to what might have been considered secondary vocational levels in the past. The outlook for the Chinese publishing industry exhibits pessimism because of this. Even the most optimistic projection for the average annual reading rate in China hovers at around four books per year, a figure that has seen minimal change over decades. In contrast, elementary students in China, driven by exam-centric pedagogy, used to read an average of 14 books per year. Noteworthy, numerous published books see sales figures remaining below ten copies, while approximately half of all published books linger as unsold inventory. Regarding the reading habits of adults, according to evaluations within the publishing sector, there remain only about two million individuals who persist in reading classical literature. Given China's population size, this figure is nearly inconsequential yet relatively stable<sup>9</sup>.

In comparison to the generation of the 1990s, the 2000s generation exhibits a notably deeper integration with mobile internet technologies. This heightened connection can be attributed primarily to China's prominence as a major producer of mobile devices and the widespread saturation of smartphones in society<sup>10</sup>. However, despite the ubiquitous presence of smartphones, the 2000s generation is sometimes perceived to lack the capacity to critically discern information and has not been adequately educated in this regard. Consequently, they are thought to inadvertently consume a substantial volume of fragmented information and knowledge, rendering them highly susceptible to the influence of the internet. They have faced criticism for following trends blindly, potentially at the expense of independent judgment, which is thought to lead to a deficiency in rationality and critical thinking. The surge in Chinese nationalism within the 2000s generation is sometimes attributed to these perceived factors.

The 2000s generation has been associated with a sense of hopelessness, characterized by the "lying flat"<sup>11</sup>. In China, preceding generations of parents often made efforts to control and guide their children's lives, striving to ensure their success. Yet, when it comes to the 2000s generation, their parents have largely relinquished these efforts, and this generation has resigned itself to the "lying flat" phenomenon. In this context, for the 2000s generation, life essentially culminates upon the conclusion of this examination, and its meaning arguably concludes thereafter.

Hence, China's 2000s generation is commonly regarded as a generation characterized by a lack of hope and, in certain instances, a generation marked by a sense of resentment with relatively little restraint. As per current statistics, there is now approximately one HIV/AIDS

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<sup>9</sup> The data is sourced from long-standing operators in the publishing industry, who employ classic works as assessment metrics, evaluated based on the number of purchasers nationwide.

<sup>10</sup> This is pointed out by ANBOUND's Wang Zhaoxi.

<sup>11</sup> "Lying flat", known as "tang ping" in Chinese, is a trend that began in 2021, and is actually a form of non-cooperative resistance by young people against society.

patient among every ten college students in China. Some within this generation tend to adopt a more cynical attitude toward others, including themselves and tend to underestimate their own potential. Nevertheless, it would be unwise to assume that the 2000s generation is wholly passive. In reality, the pendulum of history may sway, and there may be indications of some individuals within this generation following the path of the 1960s generation, displaying signs of reevaluating their lives and embarking on a path of resistance.

Finally, it should be noted that the generational time divisions involved in this paper are approximate. While sociology recognizes strict time periods for generational divisions, the author does not entirely agree with this approach and insists on using his own division. The author strongly believes that the influence between generations has a certain degree of continuity and will extend into a specific time period of the next generation. Therefore, using a major influence time frame to define different generations, even if it results in some overlap, may provide a more accurate and appropriate method to reflect reality.

Furthermore, this paper does not present a comprehensive analysis of generational issues in China but focuses solely on the generational phenomena and problems within the demographic waves of China, roughly spanning from the 1950s to the 2000s generation. This period is also a profoundly significant era in modern Chinese history. It is worth noting that many events and major issues during this era are far from the scope of current discussion and analysis. However, these can all be contextualized with generational insights to build a foundational understanding of the directional and inevitable elements within this period.