Development, transformation and uncertainties: reflections on the experience of my generation in China

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Key words biographical reflections • generational change in China • left-behind children • women’s experiences in China

Introduction

This reflective short article is written by a Chinese woman aged 26. Reflecting on the key themes for this Open Space feature, I look back on my experiences of growing up in China in the early 2000s, the changes and continuities with respect to my relationships with family members, and my aspirations and concerns which relate to being part of the recent younger generation in China and the region where I grew up. In the last part, I express my hopes that the world will become a more caring place where individuals can have more freedom to embrace their chosen lifestyles and identities.

Growing up as a ‘left-behind’ child as China opened its economic door

Born as the second child in my family in rural China, I am aware my family was fined around 20,000 RMB (equivalent to around £2,500 in the UK today) as the ‘social child-raising fee’ according to the one-child policy in operation in the late 1990s. The fine was several times the annual income of many rural families in the 1990s, including my own. Trying to comfort my family about this as I grew up, I would joke I am worth more than 20,000 RMB! Although the one-child policy has since been replaced, it has imposed a long-lasting influence on three Chinese generations over a span of 35 years.

In the rural area where I grew up, many children were taken care of by their grandparents, which was viewed as a taken-for-granted family arrangement. I did not know the term ‘left-behind children’ until I read a news report about this in middle school. It then struck me that left-behind children were a unique and worrisome social phenomenon linked to China’s opening-up economic policies.
Almost one third of the students in my secondary school lived in the school dormitories either because their homes were far from school or their parents lived in other provinces as rural migrant workers. We often expressed feelings that this parental absence had negatively influenced students’ wellbeing and generated feelings of loss regarding the lack of emotional and material support from their parents.

According to China’s hukou system (household registration system), each person is entitled to rural or urban hukou, which is tied to different welfare benefits such as educational resources and pensions. Children with rural hukou were not allowed to attend public schools in urban areas when I was a child. Due to high living expenses and limited access to education and healthcare resources in the cities, parents with rural hukou had to leave their children in their hometowns instead of taking them to the cities.

I remember asking my grandparents why my parents were not at home. I often received the answer that it was ‘because they have to make money so that you can attend school and have a better future’. The remittances my parents sent home each month and the gifts they bought for me were their limited ways of expressing love for me. I still have memories of writing letters to them and the excitement I got when I received their replies.

During my childhood, my hometown was still a vibrant village where many people were living. The villagers were usually familiar with each other and had close connections. However, as the economic gap between rural and urban areas grew bigger, I witnessed the rural decay that has marked the past decade as more and more people moved to cities. I could hardly recognise my hometown on my last visit because it had become an almost empty village. The busy streets where there used to be many social gatherings were oddly quiet and deserted.

When I was 11, my family moved to a city in my hukou province, which led to huge transformations in my life. Several years of separation made it challenging for my parents and me to get along well at the beginning. The disagreements on parenting between different generations also caused constant tension in my family. For example, my grandparents thought traditional culture and Confucianism were the best moral guidelines for children, which was by then regarded as outdated by younger generations.

‘90 Hou’: the ‘spoiled’ and ‘disillusioned’ generation

In China, people who were born between the 1990s and the 2000s are often called ‘90 Hou’, which is similar to the notion of ‘the Millennials’ in the English context. ‘90 Hou’ grew up during China’s economic boom, witnessing rapid urbanisation and wide-ranging changes in almost every social aspect. Shopping malls and entertainment facilities sprouted up, increasing consumption capacity and promoting consumer lifestyles.

Meanwhile, as the ‘digital natives’ in China, ‘90 Hou’ grew up saturated with popular culture and had unprecedented access to information via the internet. The explosion of information and opportunities to express themselves also contributed to a more heterogeneous and vibrant social environment. I feel these social and economic changes have shaped the general characteristics of young people of my generation as well as their perspectives on families, relationships and lifestyles.

The peaceful and better-off life I took for granted was beyond the dreams of previous generations. My grandparents always told me how fortunate I was to live in
such good times; they could hardly fill their stomachs when they were young. I did not realise the luck my generation had until I heard my grandparents’ stories amid the turmoil during the planned economic time.

Chinese mass media usually labels the ‘90 hou’ as ‘self-centred’, ‘spoiled’ and ‘unconventional’. Being the only children in their families, many of the ‘90 hou’ received excessive attention and possessions from older generations and were thus often referred to as the ‘little emperors’. There continues to be widespread criticism about ‘90 hou’, saying that they are selfish and only prioritise their own desires and happiness. We might not be the most selfish generation, but it is reasonable to say that we generally have stronger self-awareness and prioritise individual freedom under the influence of the one-child policy and consumerist culture.

Regardless of China’s ‘economic miracle’ in the past 20 years, however, younger people nowadays are not leading an easy life. The slowing economy, skyrocketing housing prices and fast-paced life are making them overstressed and suffering from the sense of losing control of their lives. Increasing job insecurities and the unsound welfare system are also causing more uncertainties and risks for younger people. As a result, jobs in public sectors (known as the ‘iron rice bowl’) are regaining popularity among graduates in recent years due to their stability and better benefits. The exhausted younger Chinese people are thus compared to hummingbirds. They are trapped in ceaseless cycles of competition and rarely have time for breaks, just like the hummingbirds who keep flapping their wings in the air and can hardly settle down.

Since the economic reforms in the 1980s, diligence and competence have been widely considered in China as the principles of achieving success and upward mobility. Due to the prevailing neoliberalism accompanied by significant cuts in state benefits, competition culture and myths about success in the workplace gained huge popularity until recent years.

Unlike previous generations such as my grandparents who often espoused the belief that ‘hard work pays off’, there has been a growing dissatisfaction among young people who feel trapped in cruel competition and unmanageable workloads. The spoiled children have grown up to become exhausted dagongren (meaning labourers, a sarcastic term used by young people about their unfulfilling jobs and weariness), as they have gradually become disillusioned with their seniors’ promises and expectations.

Criticism of the prevailing ‘996 work culture’ (from 9 am to 9 pm, 6 days a week) in tech sectors, went viral online in recent years. Several tragedies due to overwork in big tech companies have further triggered public anger and worries. As a kind of passive resistance to the exploitation and rat race, some people decided to ‘lie flat’, meaning being content with feasible goals and refusing to overwork and be unrelentingly competitive.

**Longing for intimacy but saying ‘no’ to marriage**

Filial piety, 在 Chinese, reflects values and virtues relating to respecting and caring for one’s parents. It is one of the most important principles guiding familial relationships in traditional Chinese culture and underlines a hierarchy between the senior and junior family members. The order of family members was thus deemed as the key to familial harmony; intimacy, however, was usually marginalised and excluded from public discussions.
Although filial piety remains fundamental in familial relationships, mutual support and intimacy among family members are gaining more attention and prominence. For example, travelling with their ageing parents has gained huge popularity among younger people as a way of practising filial piety. Many grandparents also altruistically provide childcare support to their adult children and show strong empathy when their adult children are too busy to practise filial piety or provide elder care.

The intimacy and emotional bonds between daughters and parents have also been significantly improved due to the one-child policy and women’s increasing financial independence. Daughters were traditionally seen as ‘spilt water’ after they got married, and thus not expected to take on filial piety responsibilities. However, women nowadays are usually the main carers of their ageing parents even after they get married. The bonds between daughters and parents are hugely strengthened by their intergenerational intimacy. Moreover, women are also gaining more negotiating power in choosing their parents rather than parents-in-law to help with childcare, which reduces the conflicts between wives and their parents-in-law.

Nowadays young people’s opinions about marriage and intimate relationships tend to be more open and heterogeneous. Like many of my peers, I prioritise personal development and happiness rather than adhering to the social clock. Instead of rushing into marriage, many young people prefer working on good intimate relationships, in which mutual support, equality and shared interests are significantly valued. Besides, increasing premarital sex and cohabitation among young people in China show that intimate relationships are practised in more diverse ways. For me, more open and diverse attitudes towards marriage and relationships can bring more personal freedom and opportunities for self-improvement.

Nevertheless, huge tension still exists between the desire for staying single and the stringent social rules, gender inequalities and high thresholds in the marriage market. For example, although women’s improved educational opportunities and financial status have enabled them to postpone marriage and childbirth, they still face pressure and discrimination related to expectations for marriage. Single women aged above 30, despite their high incomes and success in careers, are perceived as ‘leftover women’ in the marriage market. The stigma is causing huge pressure and anxiety for single women who prioritise their career development and individual freedom.

The social pressure of getting married has not only troubled women but also men. In many places in China, it is still compulsory for the groom to pay the ‘bride price’. The soaring bride price, especially in rural areas, is making marriage unaffordable for many families. The ‘no bride price, no marriage’ rule has caused a huge financial burden to many rural families. As a result, those who cannot afford the bride price become ‘leftover men’.

Furthermore, the criteria for a good spouse also vary between different genders. For men, socioeconomic status is more important, whereas, for women, a good appearance, a gentle personality and job stability are preferred. I think there is still a long way to go to achieve gender equality in the marriage market and women are still at higher risk of being objectified.

My hope for the future: a more caring world for everyone

The shortage of care services during the pandemic made me realise that people are so interdependent. Attentiveness to and caring for others is increasingly important for us to recover from global crises like the pandemic. Therefore, what I am hoping for is a
more caring world in the future, where economic growth and people’s wellbeing and family lives are equally valued. Economic growth should not be the only yardstick of the development of our society; rather, it should better serve the purpose of public good by improving people’s life quality and wellbeing.

The government and private sectors should provide more support to carers, especially unpaid carers, in families. The hidden costs of care in families have always been devalued and neglected, which leads to heavy financial and mental burdens for carers. We should realise that public investment in the care system can contribute to more sustainable economic growth in the long run.

In the Chinese context, I hope individuals, regardless of their hukou and socioeconomic status, can have more equal access to welfare benefits on education, pension and healthcare. People from more disadvantaged backgrounds, such as rural migrant workers, should receive more attention from social policy makers and get equivalent support on family care from the state. Furthermore, I wish diversities and various lifestyles could be more cherished and embraced in Chinese society. I hope individuals can have more freedom and opportunities to choose their own life paths and identities without facing oppression or discrimination.

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.