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Children of the reform and opening-up: China's new generation and new era of development

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Abstract

China's new generation, born during the 1980s and 1990s, is a social cohort that has grown up in the era of reform and opening-up. They are simultaneously influenced by and play a critical role in a series of significant historical events in the aftermath of the reform and opening-up. The life course of this generation is intertwined with significant social changes, such as fast economic growth, the one-child policy, education expansion, the rise of the Internet, marketization, industrialization, urbanization, and globalization. These changes greatly affect their living circumstances and opportunities, shaping the generational characteristics while widening the intergenerational gap between them and the previous generations. At the same time, however, China's new generation is unable to break the constraints of the social structure. The shared generational identity fails to eliminate the socioeconomic disparities within the generation. In contrast, marketization has strengthened the Chinese class structure through intergenerational transmission. In China's new era of development, promoting equal opportunities and narrowing socioeconomic inequality among the new generation now proves to be a new challenge.

Keywords: Reform and opening-up, New generation, Social transformation, China's New Era

Introduction

Having grown up in the era of reform and opening-up (since 1978), China's new generation¹ has developed unique social characteristics during the historical transformation of the country. Meanwhile, they have also become vanguards and promoters of this historical process. The post-1980 generation was born at the early beginning of the reform and opening-up. Having benefitted from the rapid improvement of living conditions, this generation also has to face an unprecedented level of competition due to the deepening of the marketization. Meanwhile, as pioneer internet users, the post-1980 generation shows attitudes and behavioral patterns that are mostly distinct from those of the previous generations. They make their voice heard online and in the new media, marking the rise of China's young generation. Later, as an authentic "internet

¹"China's New Generation" refers to those born after 1980, particularly the "post-1980 generation" (born from 1980 to 1989) and the "post-1990 generation" (born from 1990 to 1999).

generation,” the post-1990 generation grew up in more comfortable material conditions and a more tolerant and liberal social environment, which occurred in tandem with China’s insertion into globalization. Known for being more open-minded, diverse, and self-confident, the post-1990 generation is replacing the post-1980 generation to become the main force of China’s new generation. Meanwhile, although the majority of the post-2000ers are still attending school, they follow the steps of the post-1990 generation and are attracting increasing attention from the media and academia. The youth culture they create has become an extraordinary source of social, economic, and cultural innovation in the country. In summation, China’s new generation made by reform and opening-up is becoming the main driving force and the pioneers of the reform.

A “social cohort” formed under the reform and opening-up

The concept of “social cohorts,” proposed by German sociologist Karl Mannheim (1952), is a crucial concept in the sociology of generations. Distinct from the definition of a generation based on biological age or paternal kinship, a “social cohort” refers to a group of people of a similar age who go through significant historical events, sharing particular social characteristics and exerting significant influences on later events. According to Mannheim, a “social cohort” often develops a strong generational identity based on its shared social experience in a particular social-historical circumstance (particularly notable historical events closely related to the cohort) during adolescence years. Their values and propositions stand in sharp contrast to those of the older generations (Pilcher 1994). A “social cohort” is often simultaneously formed by and plays a critical role in major historical transformations. China’s new generation born after the reform and opening-up is a good example. They are deeply influenced by and play a key role in major historical transformations.

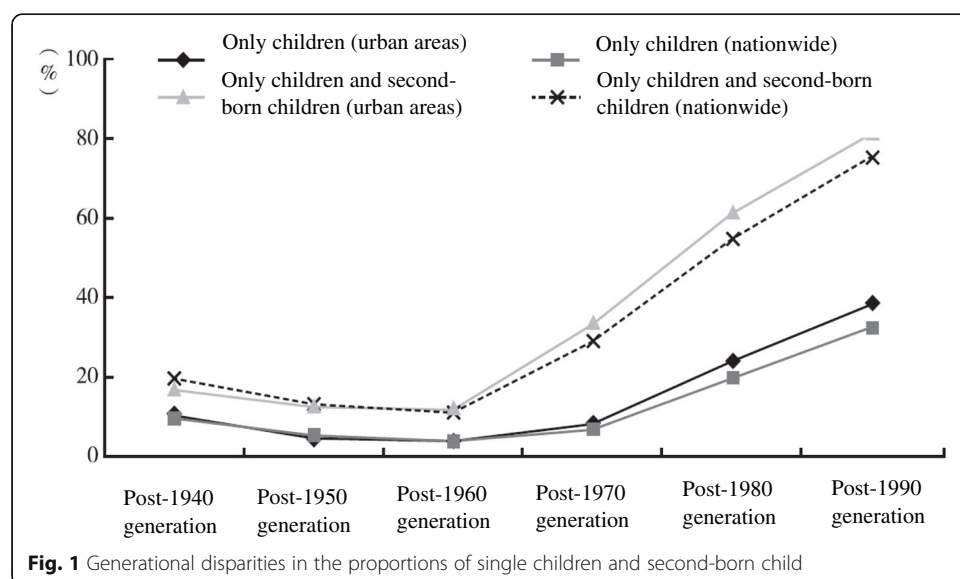
A generation of single children growing up in economic prosperity

The most common label for China’s new generation—namely, the post-1980, the post-1990, and the post-2000 generations—is the “single child.” They grow up in economic prosperity and enjoy unreserved love from their parents and grandparents. As a major historical event in China, the one-child policy has shaped the generational characteristics of the youth. This policy, combined with the country’s rapid economic growth, has a massive impact on the life course of the new generation.

The reform and opening-up has led to decades of rapid economic growth in the country, as well as a substantial improvement in the average income and living conditions. 88.3% of Chinese people lived in poverty at the beginning of the 1980s when the reform began. More than three decades later, in 2013, the poverty rate in China dropped to 1.9%, and more than 853 million people had been raised from poverty. The average disposable income in the country increased by 22.8 times from 1978 to 2017 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2018a, 2018b). China used to be one of the poorest nations in the world and is now classified as an upper-middle-income country. It is in this period of dramatic transformation that China’s new generation went through their adolescence. Also, at the beginning of the reform and opening-up, the one-child policy was implemented, which soon led to phenomena such as “small families” and “declining fertility rates.” The proportion of single children has increased

substantially. According to the data from the 2017 Chinese Social Survey (a.k.a., the CSS) conducted by the Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Fig. 1), the proportion of single children is low for the post-1960 and the post-1970 generations (4.3% and 6.8%, respectively). In comparison, 19% of the post-1980 generation and 32% of the post-1990 generation are single children. This figure is even higher for the post-2000 generation (over 60%; see the National Bureau of Statistics of China 2018a, 2018b). Although in rural areas, the majority of the post-1980ers and post-1990ers have siblings, the fertility rate declines significantly. There, “single children” and “second-born children” combine to account for 61% of the post-1980 generation and 81.6% of the post-1990 generation. In general, the majority of urban children are single children, and the majority of the youth from rural areas have one sibling.

The one-child policy and the decline in the fertility rates in China have significantly altered family structures, intrafamily relationships, and parenting styles. The rapid economic growth and the one-child policy led many prosperous Chinese families to invest more in child education. Parents pay more attention to their single child or the very few children than the parents of previous generations did. As a result, the China’s young generation enjoys a higher living standard and better nutrition compared to when their parents grew up. This has led to an enormous improvement in the physical wellbeing of the young generations. According to the World Health Organization, from 1987 to 2013, the prevalence of developmental delay among children under the age of 5 in China dropped from 38.2% to 8.1%, and the prevalence of being underweight dropped from 18.7% to 2.4%. Meanwhile, the average height and weight for the young generation have also gone through substantial increases for both rural and urban areas and both males and females (Research Team on the Physical Fitness and Health Research of Chinese School Students 2014). In particular, the physical fitness of rural adolescents has improved significantly (Gao et al. 2018). The most critical threat to adolescent health is no longer hunger, poverty, or malnutrition but the “diseases of affluence” such as obesity and overnutrition, which are prevalent among some adolescents and young adults.

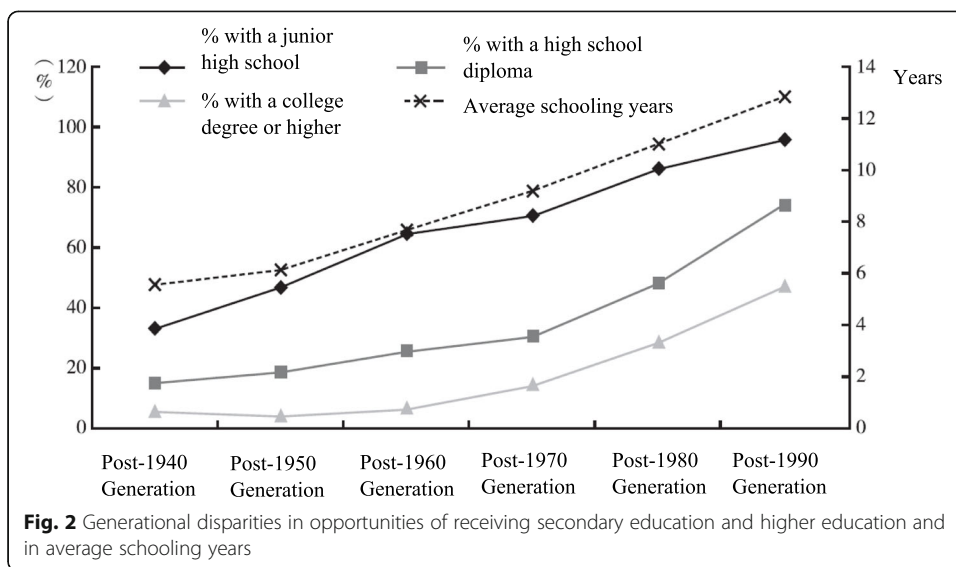


In addition to physical health, much attention has been paid to the impact of the one-child policy on the psychological characteristics, behavioral patterns, and values of China's new generation. It was once a big concern in society that the single children born after 1980 or after 1990 could become a "beat generation" that was overdependent, spoiled, self-centric, or lacked a sense of social responsibility (Bao 2011). However, as the new generation has grown up, empirical studies do not support this hypothesis. Being a single child does not necessarily generate negative consequences for one's psychological conditions or personality. In contrast, single children may enjoy better mental health since they receive more attention and intimacy from their parents (Zhan et al. 2017; Zhang et al. 2015; Zhang et al. 2007; Hao 2010).

The single-child phenomenon does not only impact the physical and mental well-being of the new generation, but also impacts many other aspects of society through individual and family dynamics. Smaller families and the decline of fertility rate have altered the traditional generational relationships and parenting styles in Chinese families. Today's families are characterized by a more equal and intimate parent-children relationship and pay more respect to children's needs and individuality (Yuan & Mu 2014, Mu & Yuan 2016, Yan & Yang 2017). The transformation of the intrafamily relationship has reshaped the intergenerational relationship in wider society since the youth people carry their self-confidence, independence, and open-mindedness into society (Zhou 2015). Young people are no longer passively indoctrinated, whereas the older generation can no longer indoctrinate the youth with their absolute authority. A more equal, tolerant, respectful, and harmonious intergenerational relationship will allow the new generation greater freedom to display their individuality and creativity. The young generation is now an important driving force for social and economic development and will enhance the innovation capacity of our society.

A generation with higher educational attainment as a result of the education expansion

The reform and opening-up has raised the education attainment of young people. The rapid economic growth has dramatically benefitted the education sector. China's new generation grew up when the country went through an unprecedented expansion of the education system: the post-1980 generation went to college during the rapid expansion of mass higher education, and the post-1990 generation received secondary education when the "universalization of 9-year compulsory education" was promoted. The Chinese government launched the policy of higher education expansion in 1999, which made higher education more accessible to the masses. Previously, the gross college admission rate in China was only 6%, or only 6 of every 100 people of collage entrance age obtained university admission. As a result of the policy of higher education expansion, the gross college admission rate increased at a surprising pace to 48.4% in 2016. In other words, almost half of the young people of the college entrance age could get access to higher education. According to the 2017 CSS data (see Fig. 2), the post-1980 generation was the major beneficiary of the policy. Their chance of receiving higher education (28.3%) is significantly higher than those of the older generations, almost doubling that of the post-1970 generation (13.8%) and quadrupling that of the post-1960 generation (6.1%). The post-1990 generation achieved further advancement. Forty-seven percent of them had access to higher education, which is almost 19% higher than that of the post-1980 generation. In 2018, the post-2000 generation entered



the college entrance age. It can be expected that a higher proportion of this group will obtain a college degree.

Approximately 60% of the new generation did not go to college during the expansion of higher education. However, they benefitted from the education expansion. Since the late 1990s, the government has been actively promoting 9-year compulsory education, which had been achieved by 2011. The education expansion means that a higher proportion of the new generation has completed secondary education. According to the 2017 CSS data (see Fig. 2), among the post-1980 generation, 85.7% have completed junior high school, and 47.6% have completed high school. These two figures were respectively 95.8% and 73.8% for the post-1990 generation. Both generations are significantly better off compared to previous generations.

The strategy of education development has a major impact on the life course of the new generation in China. They have attained more college education than previous generations. Having benefitted from the education expansion, today's young people are well equipped with knowledge, culture, and skills. The education development has provided qualified human capital for the labor market, sustained economic growth, and raised the country's global competitiveness. More importantly, the improvement of general education attainment in the country represents an advancement in the quality of population. Through education, the new generation acquires knowledge and skills, builds capacities for independent thinking, rational decision-making, and innovation, and develops senses of morality, aspiration, and self-confidence. In a highly competitive labor market, the younger generations are more competent than the older generations. Facing the development of high technology, industrial restructuring, and the emergence of new economic sectors, young people are more capable of learning, understanding, and innovating. They also lead fashion innovations in the country's rapidly changing cultural landscape. Moreover, they are more capable of adapting to changes in dramatic social transformations. All the performance has earned the new generation an unprecedentedly equal position in front of the older generations, which has significantly weakened the traditional hierarchy based on seniority. The young generations are increasingly important due to their positions and roles in society.

A generation moving in the high tide of migration

The reform and opening-up led to the shift of the country towards a market economy, which has accelerated the industrialization and urbanization, and has triggered large-scale population migration. China's new generation grew up in this context. Previously, except for some policy factors (such as the "Third Front Movement"), most people would go to school, work, and form a family in the same place where they were born. However, the marketization, industrialization, and urbanization combined to cause a dramatic wave of migration. Many young people migrated with their parents or migrated for school and job opportunities.

Since the reform and opening-up began, domestic migrants have increased substantially from 6.57 million in 1982 to its peak of 247 million in 2015. In other words, 1 in every 6 Chinese people was a migrant in that year. Although the number of migrants started to fall slowly since 2015, there were still 241 million of them by 2018 (Xiao 2019). Youth account for 65.1% of the migrant population (35.5% were born from 1980–1989, 24.3% were born between 1990 and 1999; 19.3% were born from 2000 to 2009, and 20.9% were born after 2010) (National Health Commission 2018). The data from the 2017 CSS and a survey on 6000 households in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou in 2016 (see Table 1) show that younger generations are more likely to migrate than older generations. The proportions of migrants among the younger generations are significantly higher than those of older generations. Due to the large scale of migration to cities (notably the megacities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou) among the young generations, in the urban areas of the country, 45% of the young people are not natives. In the megacities, approximately half of the young people are not natives.

The composition and characteristics of young migrants significantly differ from those of older generations. The vast majority of the migrants from the post-1950, the post-1960, and the post-1970s generations came from poor rural areas with less education (the so-called "first-generation migrant workers"). They were born and raised in poor villages, and their cultural values and behavioral patterns sharply contrast those of urbanites. Migrants from younger generations, however, are more diverse. In addition to the young migrant workers from poor rural areas, the young migrants also include those who migrate for attending college and others who migrate between cities or towns to pursue their careers. According to the 2017 CSS data, for the migrants from the post-1980 generation, 42.6% hold a non-agricultural household registration, and 38.6% hold a college degree. For the migrants from the post-1990 generation, 33.3% hold a non-agricultural household registration, and 47.1% hold a college degree. In

Table 1 Proportion of people classified as migrants across generations (%)

	Beijing	Shanghai	Guangzhou	Urban areas	Nationwide
Post-1940 generation	23.5	14.5	23.5	35.3	25.7
Post-1950 generation	17.8	13.1	23.2	28.6	22.7
Post-1960 generation	20.3	19.7	27.4	32.2	26.1
Post-1970 generation	36.9	30.1	44.9	36.1	29.6
Post-1980 generation	47.1	38.4	58.1	45.1	36.6
Post-1990 generation	53.8	43.4	61.3	45.4	36.8

Note: A person is classified as a "migrant" if he/she currently lives in a city/county that is different from where his/her household is registered

urban areas, young migrants are more likely to have a college degree, that is, 45.7% of the migrants from the post-1980 generation and 53.6% of the migrants from the post-1990 generation have completed higher education. Even among the young migrant workers from rural areas, the majority have received their elementary and secondary education in cities or small towns. They have been detached from rural life and integrated into urban life in the early stages of their lives. The cultural and behavioral gaps between young migrants and the native urban residents have diminished to a large extent. Although in large cities, social exclusion and discrimination against migrants persist (e.g., school admission for the children of migrant workers), in general, among the younger generations, the barrier between the natives and the migrants is weakening. Instead, socioeconomic status and educational attainment are more relevant factors that explain social stratification. For China's new generation, migrating with their parents or migrating for education/job opportunities has become a regular part of their lives.

The destinations of the migration are no longer limited to another city or province but can be another country. When the reform and opening-up was initiated in 1978, only 860 Chinese students were studying abroad, and by then, 248 had returned to the country after completing their study. In contrast, in 2016, 544,500 Chinese students were studying abroad, and by then, 432,500 had returned to China after completing their study (Liu 2018). In other words, in less than four decades, the number of Chinese students studying abroad increased by more than 600 times. For China's new generation, migrating represents a new life experience. That experience expands the young generation's vision, creates opportunities for personal development, and triggers their ambition. The spirit of hard work and optimism that these young migrants develop has become a driving force behind China's economic miracle.

The "Internet generation" created by the penetration of the internet and smartphones

Another label often attached to China's new generation is the "Internet generation." Thanks to the reform and opening-up, China has gone through a wave of rapid science and technology development, catching up with the developed world and even taking the lead in some sectors, such as the Internet. The development created opportunities for young people in the country. The rise of China's new generation coincided with the development of the Internet. For instance, some young writers born from 1980 to 1990 rose to prominence by using the Internet. To a certain extent, the Internet has reshaped the post-1980 generation, transformed the generational hierarchy in the society, and led to a dramatic expansion of the influence of the new generation in social, cultural, and economic realms (Li and Shi 2013; Li 2013a). More importantly, the popularization of smartphones has made the Internet even more accessible and cheaper. Access to the Internet is no longer a privilege reserved for a small group of well-educated youth; instead, it has been extended to the entire new generation. The widespread internet usage has significantly reduced the existing inequality within the new generation in access to information based on social class, educational attainment, and region. Meanwhile, the penetration of the Internet has reinforced the generational identity among young people and, to some extent, homogenized their values and behavioral patterns. The Internet has enabled the new generation to make their voice heard as a group and to exert growing influences in various social realms.

While the rapid proliferation of smartphones and the Internet has strengthened the generational identity among the youth, the digital gap between the young and the older generations has been widened. The digital gap has also exacerbated the generational gap in values, attitudes, visions, participation, and even life chances (Zhou 2016). According to the *China Statistical Report on Internet Development* published by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), by June 30, 2018, there were 802 million Internet users in China (or a penetration rate of 57.7%; see the China Internet Network Information Center 2018). The Internet penetration rate among the youth and teenagers had reached 85.5% by 2015, and 90% of the youth accessed the Internet on their smartphones (China Internet Network Information Center 2016). The 2017 CSS data (see Table 2) also show that the Internet penetration rate is particularly higher for younger generations. The post-1980 and the post-1990 generations are much more active internet users compared to the older generations.

Obviously, the new generation is far more ahead of the previous generations regarding internet usage and access to information. Young people are more likely to harness the potential of the emergent internet-based economy for career development and innovation. Against the backdrop of the information society and the knowledge economy, young people’s advantages related to the Internet are translated into their competitiveness in the labor market, which accelerates the process of generational replacement in Chinese society. The post-1980 generation has predominated in many fast-growing new economic sectors (including the Internet economy), while the post-1990 generation has also become the main driving force for innovation. These two generations have contributed much to the dynamics of the country’s economic development and innovation.

The Internet also offers young people a platform to develop their unique culture. Although public opinions on the issue are divided, the youth culture created by the new generation has undoubtedly reshaped the value system and generated considerable positive vibes in contemporary Chinese society. Traditionally, youth culture was often viewed as “deviant,” “rebellious,” “discontent,” or a grassroots culture in conflict with mainstream culture. The view is mainly due to the marginal position of the youth in

Table 2 Generational disparities in internet usage: proportion of people doing the following things every day or multiple times a week (%)

	Using the Internet	Reading political news online	Reading entertainment news online	Chatting and making friends online	Playing online games	Listening to music online/watching videos/reading web fiction	Conducting online research
Post-1940 generation	7.6	5.7	2.9	5.2	1	3.8	1.9
Post-1950 generation	11.9	9	4	6.6	1.6	6.7	3
Post-1960 generation	26.9	18.6	9.1	14.3	2.9	13.4	8
Post-1970 generation	48.1	32.3	18.9	29.9	5.8	28.5	21.9
Post-1980 generation	72.5	46.1	38.6	55.8	17.3	53.9	42.3
Post-1990 generation	86.4	49.4	55.3	74.6	36.7	73.9	53.4

traditional society, in which young people did not have a say and were passive recipients of discipline and education (Ma and Yang 2016). In contrast, in the Internet era, the youth have come to the center stage of society. No longer passive recipients of education, they have become active leaders and agents in spreading new technologies and new stuff. Instead of rebelling against mainstream culture, they become a driving force behind cultural changes (Huang 2017). In summation, the Internet has changed the position of China's new generation in society. Known for being open-minded and creative, the young generations in China have shown their agency and creativity through youth culture, incorporating new elements into the country's social, economic, and cultural development and innovation.

The new generation as promoters of value changes

The reform and opening-up not only altered the life opportunities of the Chinese people but also reshaped their values and behavioral patterns. The new generation, raised in the reform era, has shared experiences in these major social transformations. Inevitably, their values and behavioral patterns differ from those of the older generations. Ronald Inglehart proposed a "hypothesis of socialization" in his influential theory of generational replacement. That is, one's fundamental values are determined by his/her life experiences in preadult years and the circumstances in which one grows up. These fundamental values are likely to persist through one's adult years. As the younger generations grow up in conditions that differ from those that shaped the older generations, their values and behavioral patterns will also be different. As the younger generations gradually replace the older generations, this generational gap in values will lead to a transformation of the value system in society. Inglehart called this transformation a "silent revolution" (Inglehart 1977, 1990, 2013). His research on Europe and other advanced industrialized societies (and later on 43 countries around the world)² suggests that the silent revolution takes place in all societies in tandem with industrialization, economic growth, and generational replacement. During the four decades of the reform and opening-up, Chinese society has gone through changes that would take a hundred years to unfold in early industrial countries. The rapid improvement in living standards, the one-child policy, the expansion of public education, the penetration of the Internet, and the wave of migration have caused significant changes in the circumstances in which the young generations grow up. The development has also made the generational differences in values even more prominent in China. In other words, to the surprise of the older generations, the generational transformation of values pioneered by China's new generation is far more dramatic than a gradualist "silent revolution." Despite some elements that the previous generations might have accused of being deviant and radical, this transformation, in general, is oriented towards a more progressive, open, innovative, tolerant, and egalitarian society.

²The World Values Survey (WVS) is a global survey project aiming to study how the value orientations of a society change with time and changes in social policy. It was initiated by Inglehart and his colleagues, and later it was developed into a global research project coordinated by a worldwide network of social scientists. Currently, the WVS project covers over 100 countries and 90% of the world's population. Since its first survey in 1981, the project has a history of 37 years, and is currently launching its seventh wave of surveys.

The transformation of consumption values and consumption behaviors has led to new consumption patterns

One of the most notable and problematic generational differences in values and behaviors in contemporary China consists of consumption values and consumption behavior. Over a decade ago, when the generations born before 1980 were the mainstream consumers, Chinese families were known for their inclination to sacrifice current spending for precautionary savings (Li and Xu 2011). This preference was so ingrained that economists were concerned about how to incentivize consumer desires. However, as the post-1980 generation entered the consumer markets, phenomena such as living from paycheck to paycheck and purchasing housing/automobiles with loans became prevalent. Currently, the post-1990 generation became the new force in consumer markets, and the post-2000 generation is also gaining importance as consumers. Even though most of these two generations are still attending school without active incomes or their earning capacity is minimal since they only recently joined the labor force, their tendency of overconsumption is desirable to business. It is becoming a hot topic for debate in the media.

The generations born before the 1980s often find deficit spending unacceptable. They contend that consumption should be consistent with one's earning capacity, and saving money is praised as a virtue related to the wellbeing of a family. The new generation, in contrast, favors the pattern of "spending first, making money, and repaying debt later." Purchasing a residential property with a mortgage is popular among the post-1980 generation (although, in a strict sense, it can also be an investment rather than a pure consumption behavior). Later, it also became common to buy durable consumer goods (such as automobiles) with installment loans. The post-1990 and post-2000 generations now use mortgages and installment loans for their daily expenses. According to a panel study conducted by the CASS in 2017 on the employment, lives, and values of Chinese university students, 20.4% of respondents use mortgages or installment loans for their daily expenses. Among them, 77.1% have used installment loans in online shopping. During the past year, 38.7% used installment loans once, 40.7% used loans 2 to 5 times, 9.3% used loans 6 to 10 times, and 11.3% used loans more than ten times. These data suggest that deficit spending is becoming a widespread practice among the post-1990 and post-2000 generations. In just over a decade, a generational transformation from a conservative consumption pattern to deficit spending took place in China. Ten years ago, experts were concerned that high saving rates and low consumption rates could hinder economic growth; today, they are worried that the fast-growing consumption rate can lead to overconsumption and financial risks related to the high debt rates of individuals or households (Zhu 2014).

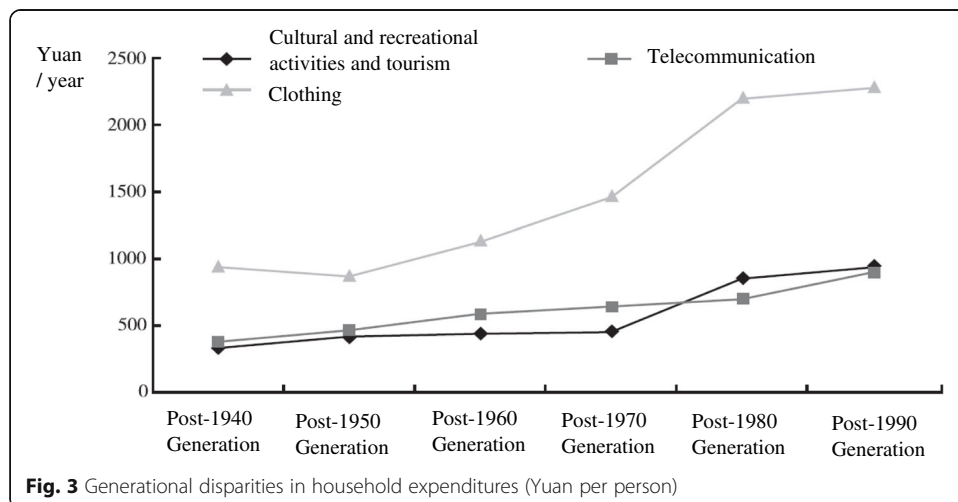
A driving force behind the prevalence of deficit spending is the emergence of a consumer society in tandem with the economic growth and improvement of living standards. That being said, the transformation of values is a more fundamental factor responsible for changes in consumer behaviors. Inglehart argued that older generations who grew up in shortages tend to value economic security more, while younger generations growing up in affluence prioritize the subjective experience of happiness. This change in values is reflected in consumer preferences. For China's new generation, consumption should serve the purpose of "fulfilling one's aspiration for a higher quality of life, satisfying one's emotional and sensational needs, and displaying one's uniqueness" (Ma 2017:286). Having been able to meet most of their daily needs, the young

generations prioritize expenditures on recreation and value their cultural and mental experiences more. The 2017 CSS data support this argument (see Fig. 3): the post-1980 and post-1990 generations spend significantly more than the older generations on culture, recreation, tourism, clothing, and telecommunication. Raised in increasingly comfortable conditions, the new generation has developed a more diversified aspiration—often nonmaterial—towards their lives. It has also become a driving force behind the upgrading of the consumer demands and industrial structure in China.

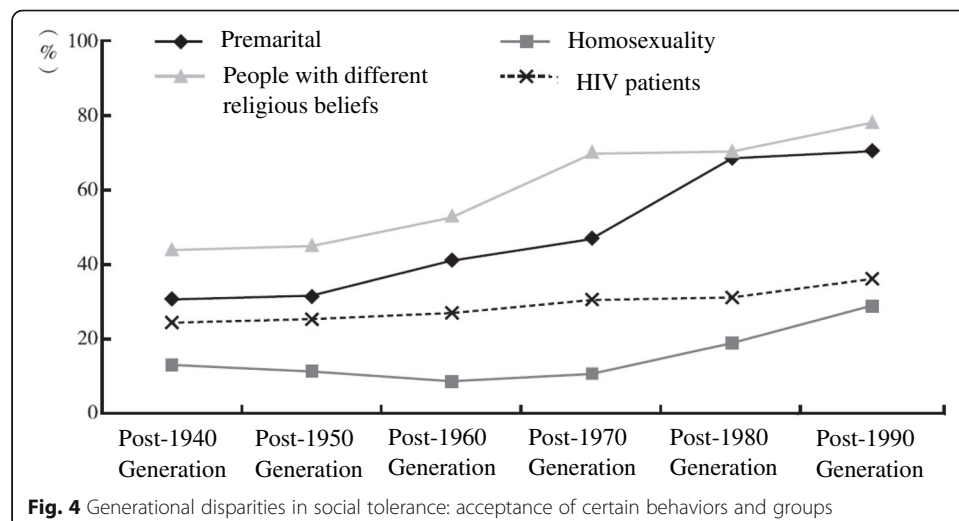
Embracing diversity leading to changing values in relationships and marriage

The reform and opening-up has not only transformed people’s economic behaviors and consumption values but also altered traditional social norms. Chinese society is becoming increasingly diversified, allowing more individual choices. New social phenomena and subcultures appear, often raising debates or even conflicts among the public. It is inevitable for a modern society, particularly during dramatic social transformations, when new things, new opinions, and new behaviors occur. The increasing tolerance of new things and especially deviant behaviors represents a transformation of social values. In Inglehart’s theory of generational replacement and value changes, the degree of tolerance in society serves as an essential indicator to measure the transition of a traditional value system to a modern one (Inglehart 2013). Here, “social tolerance” refers to the tolerance of certain social phenomena that are abnormal and deviant from existing social norms (but are legal and do not damage other people’s interests). An intolerant society often falls into various kinds of religious, cultural, societal, and political conflicts, whereas a certain level of social tolerance is favorable to social harmony and progress (Ma 2008). A traditional, closed society often imposes stringent social norms on its members and is intolerant towards abnormal behaviors or minority groups. In modern and open society, cultural integration and extensive interpersonal interactions lead to the diversification of individual values and behaviors, a higher level of social tolerance, and more respect for individuality.

The reform and opening-up has introduced a variety of new things to the country, many of which were in sharp conflict with traditional social norms. However, compared



to older generations, China’s new generation is more tolerant of new social phenomena. According to the 2017 CSS data (see Fig. 4), the younger generations show a higher level of social tolerance. Particularly, the post-1980 and the post-1990 generations are significantly more tolerant towards premarital cohabitation and homosexuality. Moreover, the post-1990 generation is much more tolerant of HIV carriers and people with different religious beliefs. The increasing tolerance in society allows young people more freedom to choose their lifestyles, gives them opportunities to try new manners and ideas, and promotes ethical transformations in society. The most radical generational changes take place on issues related to relationships, marriage, and sexuality, which the previous generations often find astonishing (Li 2017a, 2018). Before the reform and opening-up, and even during the first two decades of the reform, premarital sex and cohabitation were considered shameful and unacceptable by mainstream society. Even now, only 30% of the post-1940 and the post-1950 generations and 40% of the post-1960 generation approve of premarital cohabitation. In contrast, this behavior is accepted by 70% of the post-1980 and post-1990 generations. Premarital sex is also widely accepted among the young generations. These different attitudes towards relationships, marriage, and sexuality often cause conflicts among different generations. For example, the phenomena of “leftover woman” and “marriage-free” among single adults are worrisome for parents (Zhang 2014; Sun 2013). Meanwhile, the fact that parents pressure children to get married also causes tremendous marriage-related anxiety among the new generation (Yang 2014). The transformation of the attitudes towards childbearing is equally striking. The traditional value predominant in Chinese society was “more children, more happiness” to the degree that the government implemented the one-child policy to control population growth. However, many of the post-1980ers and post-1990ers are unwilling to have a second child when the one-child policy is abolished. Overall, China’s new generation is making society more tolerant and promoting new attitudes towards marriage and relationships. Thanks to these efforts, Chinese society is becoming increasingly open and free, with more respect for individuality.



Increasing civic engagement makes shared governance in society possible

According to Inglehart's theory of generational replacement and value changes, increasing civic engagement is an important aspect that marks the transition from a materialist value system to a postmaterialist one. Those who hold a materialist worldview pay particular attention to individual material needs and economic interests. With the improvement of living standards and the satisfaction of fundamental material needs, people start to pay more attention to social and public affairs. Known as an "internet generation" with high educational attainment, China's new generation is more willing to participate in social affairs compared to previous generations (Li 2013b; Liu 2018; Dong 2013). The 2017 CSS data also support this argument (see Table 3). The younger generations pay much more attention to political and social affairs compared to the older generations. The post-1980 and post-1990 generations are significantly more likely to read online political news frequently. The post-1990 generation is also significantly more willing to discuss political issues with others. Moreover, the younger generations are also more likely to volunteer or participate in charity work. Although the level of participation in social organizations in the country remains low, the post-1990 generation shows significantly higher rates of joining a "cultural and recreational association" or a civic group compared to the older generations. The younger generations are increasingly eager to join social and informal organizations, and the post-1990 and the post-2000 generations are becoming pillars in the cultural market (Liu 2018).

Due to the penetration of the Internet among China's new generation and its increasingly important role in social life, civic participation among young people is often closely associated with social media. Some online social networks are created around certain people or specific topics. These networks are becoming a kind of new, low-cost, informal social organization, providing platforms for civic engagement for the new generation (for example, online groups of alumni, parents, and colleagues/coworkers). As the post-1980 and the post-1990 generations enter college, WeChat moments and groups became very popular among fellow students as important channels for social networking and information sharing, as well as informal channels for discussing and participating in public affairs. WeChat moments/groups among colleagues/coworkers play a similar role. Although these are mainly used for professional communications, they also serve as complementary channels for interpersonal interactions, information diffusion, and social participation. In recent years, as many post-1980ers and post-1990ers become parents, their WeChat parenting groups are also very active. These groups encompass diverse voices on public affairs related to education and the social environment in which teenagers grow up, which serve as powerful driving forces for improving the quality of public administration and service. The reform and opening-up has generated increasingly more opportunities for China's new generation to participate in social affairs, which is favorable for the country's development and social progress (Shi and Shen 2018).

The reform and opening-up has generated more and more opportunities for China's new generation to participate in social affairs, which is positive for the country's development and social progress (Shi & Shen, 2018). The goal to achieve a "shared governance" proposed by the Communist Party and the Chinese government needs to be solidly based on wide social participation, particularly the participation of the youth. In 2017, the Chinese government released *The Middle- and Long-Term Youth Development Plan (2016-2025)* (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017), which listed social participation and

Table 3 Generational disparities in social participation (%)

	Frequently reading political news online	Discussing politics with others online or in-person	Volunteering in activities organized by the government, workplace, or school	Volunteering in activities organized by social organizations	Joining cultural, sports, and recreational groups	Joining civic associations	Joining professional associations	Joining alumni associations
Post-1940 generation	5.7	8.1	2.8	5.3	4.9	2.9	1.1	5
Post-1950 generation	9	8.2	3.6	9.3	4.3	2.5	1.6	9
Post-1960 generation	18.6	8.6	6.2	14.2	3.8	3.6	3.2	15.1
Post-1970 generation	32.3	12.2	8.7	16.8	4.3	5.3	6	23.6
Post-1980 generation	46.1	17.5	11	17.9	4.3	6	8.3	33.8
Post-1990 generation	49.4	27.8	22.7	22.1	13.5	12	9	46.9

social integration of the youth as one of the ten important realms of youth development. This will further encourage China's new generation to participate in social affairs, as well as broaden the content and approaches of civic engagement, so that the youth can make greater contribution to the country's development.

The stratification within China's new generation in a context of rural-urban duality

China's new generation grew up in multiple major social, economic, and cultural transformations. Their life is deeply embedded in a number of historical events, namely, the rapid economic growth, the one-child policy, the expansion of the education system, the proliferation of the Internet, marketization, industrialization, urbanization, and globalization. These events not only impact their life opportunities but also shape their generational characteristics and reinforce a sense of generational identity that distinguishes them from previous generations. That being said, this commonality does not eliminate the inequalities based on the rural-urban division or social classes within the generation. The new generation is not a homogeneous one. Only children from urban middle-class families are likely to get admission in top universities or study abroad, and later become successful professionals or business elites; in contrast, children from poor rural families may fail the competition in the education system and become migrant workers at an early age (Li 2017b). The inequalities based on the rural-urban division and social class have led to the unequal development of China's new generation. While some can harness the opportunities of the country's development, others fall behind.

The persisting rural-urban inequality has profound impacts on China's new generation, leading to disparities between the youth from urban areas and those from rural areas regarding the circumstances in which they grew up and their opportunities for development. Numerous empirical studies suggest that being raised in an urban or a rural family makes a difference in one's educational opportunities (Li 2014; Wu 2013), which further leads to inequalities in opportunities in other spheres (Wen 2005). At the beginning of the 21st century, the post-1980ers who first captured society's attention were a group of well-educated urban youth whose parents also had high educational attainments. The generational culture that these pioneers created was, however, irrelevant to the young migrant workers, who consist of the majority of the post-1980 generation. These migrant workers remained as the silent majority. Only several years later, as the post-1980 generation migrant workers demonstrated very different work ethics and life goals from the older generations, employers and researchers started calling them "new-generation migrant workers." However, within the post-1980 generation, the inequality between the well-educated urban youth and the young migrant workers remains striking. This intragenerational stratification is no less significant than the intergenerational one. Thanks to the higher education expansion, the proliferation of the Internet and smartphones, and the rapid urbanization, the post-1990 generation youth from rural areas have more opportunities to contact the urban culture. Many of them go to school or live in the city, and they also have more opportunities to go to college. While all these factors somehow contribute to reducing the urban-rural gap, the rural-urban inequality persists.

Urban youth with a college degree (they are the majority of the urban white-collar workers) and rural youth who did not attend college (young migrant workers) are the two ends of the spectrum of the stratified new generation. The former is often called "second-

generation urban youth,” and the latter is often called “second-generation rural youth.” According to the 2017 CSS data, the majority (73.2%) of the country’s youth fall into these two categories: 20.8% are “second-generation urban youth,” and 52.4% are “second-generation rural youth”. The rest, or slightly less than 30% of the youth, can be roughly classified into two groups: the “counter-attackers” (16.3%), which refer to the rural youth that went to college and surpassed the “rural-urban division” during the higher-education expansion, and the “stagnators” (10.5%), which refer to the urban youth who did not receive higher education. This categorization illustrates the socioeconomic stratification within China’s new generation in different aspects of social and economic life.

Stratification in employment and income

Employment opportunities and income are two fundamental aspects of the stratification within China’s new generation. A regression analysis using the 2017 CSS data (see Table 4) highlights the economic inequality between the second-generation urban youth and the second-generation rural youth, which is an example of the apparent divisions within the young generations. Meanwhile, income inequality is also present between the counter-attackers and the stagnators. The average annual income of the second-generation urban youth is almost double that of the second-generation rural youth (or 27,462.9 yuan higher). The average annual income of the counter-attackers is also 15,902.9 yuan higher than that of the second-generation rural youth, suggesting that youth from rural families can improve their economic situations through receiving higher education. However, compared to the second-generation urban youth who have received higher education, the counter-attackers still earn significantly less (11,560 yuan lower), mainly because the latter are more likely to attend vocational schools or second/third tier universities, which are often viewed as having lower quality. Moreover, although the stagnators do not have college degrees either, their average annual income is nevertheless 6224.9 yuan higher than that of the second-generation rural youth. Regarding job opportunities, compared to the second-generation rural youth, the second-generation urban youth enjoy higher employment rates and lower unemployment risk. The constant term in the model (1.096) shows that the employment rate of the second-generation rural youth is very low. Almost half of the second-generation rural youth who have left school are not working, whereas over 70% of the second-generation urban youth who have left school are employed. The employment rates of the counter-attackers and the stagnators are higher than that of the second-generation rural youth but lower than that of the second-generation urban youth. That being said, although the counter-attackers prevail over the stagnators regarding the employment rate, the former face higher unemployment risk. The employment rates indicate that being from an urban family per se generates some employment advantages. Although the stagnators do not hold a college degree, their employment status is more secure than that of the counter-attackers who have a college degree. The fact that the stagnators have lower employment rates than the counter-attackers suggests that the former are more likely to be able to live on their parents’ economic support. In summation, it is evident that China’s new generation is highly stratified concerning income and employment opportunities.

Table 4 Socioeconomic stratification of China's new generation (results of regression analysis)

Dependent variables	Income and employment			Consumption		
	Annual income (Yuan)	Employment rate	Unemployment risk in the next 6 months	Expenditures on clothing (Yuan)	Expenditures on cultural and recreational activities (Yuan)	Expenditures on telecommunication (Yuan)
Constant term/ second-generation rural youth	27,423.1*	1.096*	0	1528.4*	330.5*	667.5*
Second-generation urban youth	27,462.9*	2.402*	-.783*	2342.8*	1780.6*	382.4*
Counter-attackers	15,902.9*	1.904*	-.341*	963.6*	887.7*	194.1*
Stagnators	6224.9*	1.473*	-.601*	719.7*	579.1*	242.5*
R ² /-2LL	0.062	4614.3	132.2	0.061	0.049	0.014
Sample size	4078	4078	4078	4078	4078	4078
Social participation						
Dependent variables	Frequently reading political news online	Discussing political issues with others in person or online	Participating in volunteer activities organized by the government, workplace, or school	Participating in self-organized volunteer activities	Joining cultural, sports, and recreational groups	Joining civic associations
Constant term/ second-generation rural youth	0.576*	0.163*	0.085*	0.169	0.051*	0.051*
Second-generation urban youth	3.670*	3.673*	5.400*	2.646*	3.475*	3.419*
Counter-attackers	2.572*	3.082*	4.977*	2.275*	3.288*	3.661*
Stagnators	1.362*	1.292	1.341	0.854	1.281	1.289
-2LL	5354.1	4086.2	3314.6	3921.5	2288.6	2321.7
Sample size	4078	4078	4078	4078	4078	4078

Note: "Annual income," "expenditures on clothing," "expenditures on cultural and recreational activities," and "expenditures on telecommunication" are linear regression coefficients; "unemployment risk during next 6 months" is a logistic regression coefficient; and "employment rate," "frequently reading political news online," "discussing political issues with others in person or online," "participating in volunteer activities organized by government, workplace or school," "participating in self-organized volunteer activities," "joining cultural, sports, and recreational groups," and "joining civic associations" are logistic regression odds ratios
* $p=0.005$

The difference in consumption patterns and lifestyles

The stratification within the new generation is also reflected in everyday life. Although, in general, the younger generations enjoy better living standards compared to the older generations, the disparities in consumption patterns and lifestyles are quite significant between the second-generation urban youth and the second-generation rural youth. As basic needs are met, contemporary young people pursue a variety of other things. They view fashioned clothing as an expression of self-confidence, personality, esthetics, and

status. They also find cultural and recreational activities, the Internet, and smartphones indispensable. However, due to the variations in their purchasing power and circumstances, youth from different family backgrounds find themselves widely different in consumption practices. The 2017 CSS data indicate that the expenditures on clothing, cultural and recreational activities, and communication are stratified within the young generations. Table 4 shows that the second-generation urban youth spend 2.5 times more on clothing and 6.4 times more on cultural and recreational activities than the second-generation rural youth do. The gap in expenditures on telecommunication is slightly narrower; yet, the second-generation rural youth only spend 60% of their urban counterparts. Regarding these expenditures, the stagnators and the counter-attackers are placed in between the two groups mentioned above. These statistics reflect how consumption practices vary within the young generations. These consumption practices are closely associated with the living conditions of individuals, reinforcing class boundaries, and becoming a mechanism of social stratification.

Variation in the level of social participation

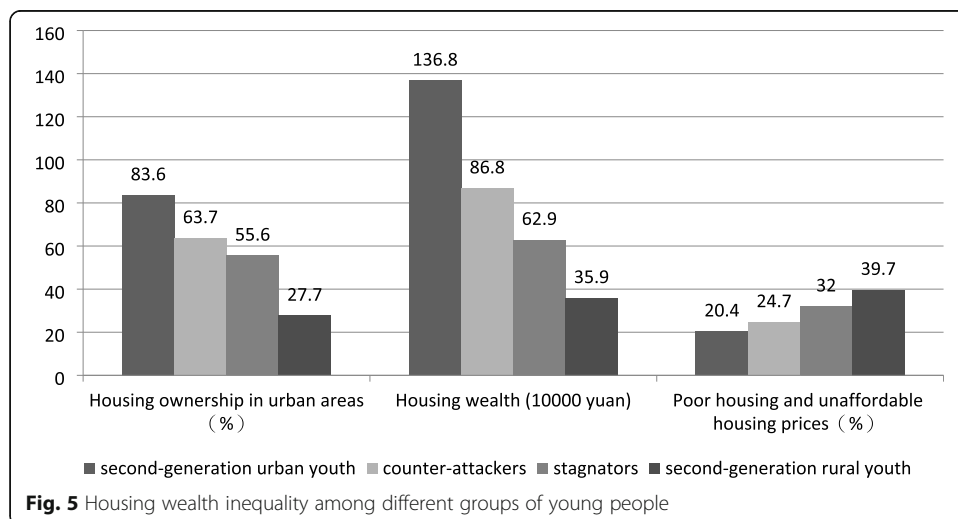
The stratification within China's new generation can also be identified in the sphere of public life. Although, in general, the young generations demonstrate the higher willingness of social participation than the older generations, the situation varies widely with each subgroup of the young generations, particularly between the second-generation urban youth and their rural counterparts, according to the 2017 CSS data. Table 4 highlights the variations among different subgroups of the contemporary youth regarding "interest in political issues," "participation in volunteering activities," and "participation in social organizations." The second-generation rural youth pay much less attention to political affairs. Only one-third of them frequently read political news online, and one-tenth discuss political issues with others. Among the second-generation urban youth, these proportions are 3.67 times as high. The second-generation rural youth are also less likely to participate in volunteering activities organized by governments, work units, or schools (approximately 8%), and only 15% have participated in self-organized volunteering activities. Among the second-generation urban youth, these two indicators are 5.4 times and 2.65 times as high, respectively. Moreover, the second-generation rural youth are less likely to join civic organizations. Only approximately 5% of this group have participated in recreational, cultural, and sports groups, or other civic associations. These two rates for the second-generation urban youth are 3.48 times and 3.42 times as high, respectively. These disparities in civic engagement represent deep social divisions within China's new generation. Although many of the second-generation rural youth live in cities, in reality, they are excluded from public life there, and their identity as urban citizens is yet to be formed.

Inequality in housing wealth

One major outcome of China's reform and opening up is the rapid growth of private wealth, which, however, is accompanied with the exacerbation of private wealth inequality, particularly housing inequality. On the one hand, properties constitute a dominant part of wealth for ordinary families in China. On the other hand, the wealth growth of most Chinese families, to a large extent, has primarily been driven by the

soaring housing prices in urban China over the past decade or so (Research Institute of China Economic Development Trends 2018, 2019). Due to the soaring housing prices in urban areas, millennials in general cannot afford to purchase a property, which has become a global phenomenon. Numerous millennials across Europe, unable to afford a house of their own, are labeled as the “Generation Rent” (Mckee et al., 2017; Hoolachan et al., 2017). In China, most of the millennial generation have to seek financial support from parents to purchase a house (or apartment) so as to start a family. As a result, the intergenerational transmission of wealth inequality is increasingly exacerbated, creating an ever-widening gap between the young people from urban families and those from rural families. The former (the so-called “second-generation urban youths”) are more likely to purchase properties with financial support from their parents who already have properties and enjoy wealth appreciation brought about by the property boom. By contrast, the latter (the so-called “second-generation rural youths”) cannot expect to get much financial support from their parents in this regard, as their parents usually belong to the lower-income group whose rural properties are not worth much. Worse still, some rural marriage-age men cannot find a spouse and remain bachelors simply because they cannot afford a property, which is deemed a must for marriage.

The 2017 CSS data indicates the housing wealth inequality among different groups of young people. Figure 5 shows the urban housing ownership of married millennials born in the 1980s and the 1990s. Even among the millennials who have completed higher education, there is still a clear gap between those from urban families (the “second-generation urban youths”) and those from rural families (the “counter-attackers”) in housing ownership. More specifically, those from urban families significantly outperform those from rural families in terms of both property ownership rate and property value. As for millennials who are less educated in urban and rural areas, such a housing gap remains there. That is to say, the less educated urban youths (the “stagnators”) still outperform the “second-generation rural youths” in terms of both property ownership rate and property value. It is evident that urban and rural millennials are respectively at the two ends of housing wealth spectrum. About 83.6% of married millennials from urban families own properties, whereas only 27.7% of married millennials from rural families do so. On average, the former’s property value is 3.8 times higher than the latter’s. In



addition, some 40% of the “second-generation rural youths” have claimed that they “suffer from poor living conditions and cannot afford a house (or apartment),” while only 20% of the “second-generation urban youths” have mentioned such a problem.

For millennials, housing inequality reflects polarization between the rich and the poor and, more importantly, uneven distribution of future opportunities. The “second-generation rural youths,” including the “counter-attackers,” are under bigger economic pressure to purchase a house (or apartment) as they can get little financial support from their parents. A large part of their income is used to pay the rent. In order to save for property purchase, they tend to choose higher-paying occupations, irrespective of their development prospects. Due to such an economic pressure, some of them may be forced to leave big cities with better development opportunities and thus have their room for future development limited. The “second-generation urban youths,” by contrast, benefiting from their parents’ financial support, generally do not feel much pressure to purchase a house (or apartment). Consequently, they are more willing to continue investing in their personal development and prefer occupations with better development prospects, more innovations, a bigger potential for growth, and higher long-term economic returns.

Conclusions: to promote equal opportunities for the new generation proves to be a new challenge in China’s new era of development

The reform and opening-up is a critical historical process that shapes China’s new generation. A number of events that occurred in this period have huge impacts on the youth: a substantial improvement of living conditions brought by rapid economic growth, changing family structures and parenting styles caused by the one-child policy, a general improvement in educational access and quality thanks to the universalization of 9-year compulsory education and the expansion of higher education, the emergence of the information society and the knowledge economy due to the penetration of the Internet and smartphones, opportunities and the pressure of competition generated by the marketization, urbanization, and industrialization, and the insertion of China into globalization, which creates both cultural confidence and cultural conflicts. These events lead to dramatic economic, social, and cultural transformations in the country, shaping the generational characteristics of the youth. In this process, China’s new generation has developed a value system and behavioral patterns that are distinct from those of previous generations. They grow up and play a critical role in the country’s major transformations. Their individual life trajectories are deeply embedded in macro-level social changes.

China’s young generations not only share some unique generational characteristics but also carry the prints of the country’s rural-urban disparity and social stratification. Their shared generational characteristics are subjected to the social structure, and their generational identity fails to eliminate the socioeconomic inequality within the generation. Meanwhile, the deepening of the marketization has reinforced the intergenerational transfer of social status. The “second-generation phenomenon” (i.e., the contrast between the second-generation urban youth and the second-generation rural youth and that between the second-generation rich and the second-generation poor) has become a feature of China’s new generation. The inequality within the new generation is not only a problem of the youth but also a social problem.

After 40 years of reform and opening-up, China has ushered in a new era characterized by significant changes both domestically and internationally. The new era has raised new challenges for China's new generation. In domestic market, the slowing economic growth and higher economic risks bring about a variety of uncertainties that can overshadow the future of the millennials. In the international arena, the cultural and ideological confrontations between China and Western countries are increasingly highlighted and the China-the US trade tensions are escalating, leading to a setback for globalization and challenging the established values of China's millennials in many ways.

As the development of the nation faces a more complex situation, the new generation has entered new stages in their lives. Many of the post-1980ers have become parents and entered their middle ages. They are raising their children—the second-generation single children—with new ideas and are making decisions on whether to have a second child. The post-1990 generation has become the main force of the new generation. Against the backdrop of a decelerating domestic economy and the heavy competition from the global economy, they face increasing pressure due to market competition, yet the rise of the Internet opens up new opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurship. Most post-2000ers are still attending school, but they are also actively creating their youth culture online; their rise as consumers will have impacts on consumption trends and cultural fashions. In China's new era of development, social, economic, and cultural changes will continue shaping the country's new generation. An accelerating generational replacement remains a driving force of the development of society.

Acknowledgements

N/A.

Author's contributions

Li Chunling did all the work for this paper. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

The author declares no funding support.

Availability of data and materials

I used CSS data for 2017, which can be accessed at http://css.csn.cn/css_sy/ztlxwm/.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Received: 10 April 2020 Accepted: 24 August 2020

Published online: 15 October 2020

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