

“Our Generation”: The Making of Collective Identifications in China and Taiwan

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This special feature of *China Perspectives* tackles the important topic of generational identities and the original forms of collective actions they give way to across the contemporary Sinophone world along various processes of social change. This project stems from observing the development of a rich diversity of generational labels – whether imposed or self-assigned – that have flourished within the Sinophone world in the past decades: the “post-1950s/1980s” (*wuling/baling hou* 五零/八零後), the “lost generation” (*shiluo de yidai* 失落的一代), the “second generation of only children” (*du er dai* 獨二代), or the “fifth generation of filmmakers” (*diwu dai daoyan* 第五代導演) in China; the “baby boomers” (*ying yi chiu sai doi* 嬰兒潮世代), “generation X” (*X sai doi* X 世代), the “post-eighties” (*baat sap hau* 八十後), or the “cursed generation” (*bei jo jau dik jat doi* 被詛咒的一代) in Hong Kong; the “(wild) strawberries tribe” (*(ye)caomei zu* (野)草莓族), the “postwar generation” (*zhanhou shidai* 戰後世代), the “fifth-graders” (*wunianji* 五年級), “millennials” (*qianxi* 千禧), the “weary generation” (*yanshi dai* 厭世代), or the “second generation of mainlanders” (*waishengren houdai* 外省人後代) in Taiwan. All these terms seem to suggest an important diversity of generational identities and labelling, revealing both fault lines separating social groups and complex processes of collective identifications based on cohort-shared experiences of various natures. Indeed, some of these terms may be used in everyday life, while others seem restricted to the realm of academic language. Some are taken for granted while the legitimacy of others is subject to debate and negotiation. Some are mobilised by individuals to define themselves and identify with others, sometimes leading to collective actions in the name of generationally shared interests or values, while others may be used as stigmatising labels imposed on others. Some are named after specific place-based events or experiences, while others may borrow from foreign categories and circulate across borders. Some refer to experiences largely shared societally, whereas others only make sense within particular subgroups (social, professional, or ethnic groups). And even though some of these terms look

alike – the post-eighties in China and Hong Kong, for example –, they may in fact encompass very distinct collective values and interests according to the context in which they are formulated. As a whole, these terms reflect the richness and diversity of generational identifications and categories in different parts of the Sinophone world, and question the importance of generations as a classificatory agent shaping social relationships, representations, and collective actions.

As several sociologists have pointed out, until 20 years ago, the notion of generation was largely neglected in the sociological study of social stratification as compared to social class, gender, or “race” (Pilcher 1994; Edmunds and Turner 2002: 1). Since then, and probably along with the growing popularity of the notion of generations in public discourse itself, “a change, at some level, has occurred with renewed academic focus on the sociology of generations” (Connolly 2019: 2). While previous approaches tended to be subsumed into the realm of life course studies or to “specific features of social histories” documenting the “impact of specific generations on social change,” researchers have started to “[explore] generations as a further collective identity deserving of attention” (Edmunds and Turner 2002: 2). In this perspective, Karl Mannheim’s seminal work, “The Problem of Generations” (1952), has constituted “the canonical unifying point of reference in the field” (Connolly 2019: 2). His early essay indeed demonstrated the link between generational consciousness and the subjective experience of time: while “generation location” only describes the common position held by people born roughly about the same time in the “historical dimension of the social process” (1952: 290), “generational actuality” (or actual generation) arises “where a concrete bond is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic de-stabilization,” leading to the consciousness of same life prospects (*ibid.*: 303). Individuals may, however, respond differently to this “tempo of change,” thus participating in the creation of “generational units,” whose members articulate the consciousness of their shared location through specific ways

of “[working] up the material of their common experiences” (*ibid.*: 304). In this sense, first impressions and youth experiences, but also moments of intense instability and social change, play a critical role in the formation of this consciousness. Drawing from Karl Mannheim, a growing body of research has therefore pointed out the need to turn away from the reductionism of generations as cohorts (age groups) in order to pay attention to the processes leading “different birth cohorts [to] define themselves in terms of a common generational category” (Edmunds and Turner 2002: 180). Such studies have therefore insisted on the crucial role of shared experience of traumatic events, of narration and storytelling, as well as of intergenerational relations and gendered experiences in the emergence of generational identities.

As Michel Bonnin indicated, the “awareness of being part of a certain generation (...) is more widespread in China than in most countries” (2006: 245) – a remark that could also apply to Hong Kong and Taiwan given the proliferation of generational labels quoted above, and which may echo the intensity of social changes that have shaped these spaces’ recent past, though in very different ways. As such, generational approaches have also developed within China studies, especially since the late 1990s. In China, particular attention has been given to the life course of the “lost generation” of the Cultural Revolution (Chan 1985; Hung and Chiu 2003; Bonnin 2016; Yang 2016; Xu 2019) and to the younger generations of only children (Moore 2005; Yan 2006; Constantin 2013; Kan 2013). In Taiwan, some have focused on the generations stretching between the Japanese occupation and the oppositional *Tangwai* Movement (*Dangwai yundong* 黨外運動, literally “outside the Party”) of the 1970s and 1980s from the perspective of their role in intellectual and political history (Hsiao 2010, 2021; Wu *et al.* 2017), while others have centred their studies on the changing political attitudes, collective values, and identities of younger Taiwanese born in the 1980s and 1990s, following democratisation (Chang and Wang 2005; Rigger 2006; Lepesant 2011, 2012). In Hong Kong, researchers have shown the connection between the recent emergence of the term *baat sap hou* (post-1980s) and the debates surrounding the politicisation of members of this cohort in the post-handover context (Lui 2007; Shen and Wong 2012; Ku 2019).¹ However, despite rare exceptions (e.g. Bonnin 2006; Hsiao 2021), quantitative approaches as well as understanding generations as strictly defined cohorts remain largely dominant in these (usually rather scattered) studies. Existing research tends to overlook the understanding of the processes and social configurations leading to multiple forms of generational identifications, as well as the representations and debates surrounding the specific use of currently proliferating generational labels. In other words, as sociologist Hsiao A-chin recently put it in the context of Taiwanese research on generations, age tends to be “treated objectively as a factor in the social background of the respondents, rather than as constitutive of subjective identity” (2021:14).

By taking on more grounded and understanding approaches to processes of generational identifications, the five articles in this special feature offer a somewhat different perspective on generations in China and Taiwan: they question what people mean and whom they include when they talk about “our generation” (*women zhe yi dai* 我們這一代), and delve into the specific situations and social configurations leading individuals to express generational forms of collective identification. Sun Jiawen’s article first focuses on the label of “youth without regrets” (*qingchun wuhui* 青春無悔), associated with *zhiqing* (知青, educated youth or send-down youth) in China since the early 1990s, and carefully unravels its genealogy based on first-hand interviews. While the legitimacy of this label is often dismissed or at least debated, and its origin is usually attributed to elite *zhiqing* whose sent-down experiences were more likely to have been positive, Sun shows that, against all odds, the *zhiqing* who first promoted the use of that label were actually less likely to be “without regrets.” She explains this paradox by demonstrating the utilitarian promotion of the “youth without regrets” label by specific subgroups of less well-off *zhiqing* in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, in order to render their plans to commemorate their collective past acceptable to the Chinese authorities. Sun shows that, far from being a reified and reifying label, “youth without regrets” actually reveals the complex issues and negotiations associated with processes of generational labelling in the Chinese context: both because narration and storytelling critical to the creation of generational consciousness (Edmunds and Turner 2002: 181) remain politically constrained in China, and because the various experiences that different categories of *zhiqing* have lived through can lead individuals to endorse multiple and sometimes conflicting narratives of the past and the present.

The relationship between storytelling, generational identity, and collective actions is further demonstrated in Hong Tao’s article, which also focuses on former *zhiqing*, though from a very different approach. Through analysis of the (auto)biographical essays and daily records published by two former sent-down women on their respective online blogs created around 2007, Hong pinpoints the role played by these women’s interpretation of their own past in their becoming pioneers and motherly figures of *tongzhi* (同志)² advocacy. Far from a deterministic view of the life course, and through a careful reconstruction of their “temporally embedded process of social engagement” (p. 22), Hong demonstrates the political agency driving these two women’s recent activist careers. The article therefore argues that the birth of “LGBT community mothering in China,” initiated by these two women, was both “born out of the encounter between two

1. See also Chan King-fai 陳景輝, “八十後的前世今生” (*Bashi hou de qianshi jinsheng*, Past and present of the post-1980s), *InMediaHK.net* (獨立媒體), 10 January 2010, <http://www.inmediahk.net/node/1005677> (accessed on 10 October 2020).

2. *Tongzhi* (comrade) is a term increasingly used in Chinese-speaking communities to refer to gays, lesbians, and more broadly to non-gender conforming individuals.

generations” – “two ex-*zhiqing* mothers learning to navigate retired life while critically reflecting on their personal and collective past; and ‘marital age’ *tongzhi* youths facing social stigma and marginalisation while seeking to build community solidarity and reclaim family warmth” – and “enabled by a dynamic blogosphere appearing as a space for critical discourses and a social arena for self-(re)invention” (*ibid.*).

Justine Rochot’s article similarly points out the role of the Internet as a critical space for community-making, the gendered aspects of generational consciousness, as well as the influence of ageing and retirement as pivotal moments in the life course where the narration of the self plays an important part in the reconfiguration of collective identifications. Through content analysis of the popular online show called “Beijing *Dama* Have Something to Say,” where retired women born between the late 1940s and mid-1960s speak up in the name of their ageing peers, her article examines new forms of group identification and online collective actions emerging among recently retired urban women, brought up during the Maoist era and belonging to the first cohorts of one-child parents. Unravelling the different types of “we” that these retired women speak for and the grievances that they address, Rochot shows that their group consciousness is indeed informed by their shared disrupted upbringing under Maoism, but should also be understood, more broadly, as the result of multiple social processes of group-making.

Lin Qing and Mao Jingyu’s article further delves into the topic of grandparenting – an increasingly widespread phenomenon that they describe as “a crucial site to explore the relationships between the first generation of only children in China and their parents” (p. 47). Based on their analysis of 120 interviews conducted among family members of different generations in Tianjin, the authors confront the diverging views and experiences held by two coincidentally social and familial generations (adult only children born in the pivotal 1980s and their mostly retired parents born in the postwar era) on childrearing and family obligations. As the recourse to grandparents for childrearing has become increasingly common in China in a context of reduced public support for childcare, the article challenges widespread familialist representations by pointing out the burden that such obligations often represent for ageing grandparents as well as the conflicts, dissatisfactions, and negotiations it leads to between generations. While they argue that these views illustrate an individualisation process taking place among both only children and their ageing parents brought up in an era of collectivism, they show that the limitations of the social welfare system still somehow repress older parents’ expression of their individualisation and contribute to maintaining a strong sense of co-dependency and solidarity among generations, despite the frustrations it can generate. Though taking on a perspective centred on familial generations, the article nonetheless identifies the articulation between tensions observed in the familial sphere and generationally shared attitudes and values taking place on a larger societal level.

While most articles of the special feature reveal the increased

academic interest towards the collective identifications and ageing experiences of postwar cohorts in the Chinese contexts, Tanguy Lepesant’s article allows us to turn away from China and examine other types of generational identifications taking place among Taiwanese young adults. Lepesant demonstrates that the vast majority of existing research on generations in Taiwan tends to apprehend generations as cohorts and usually delimits them using specific dates, which often vary from one research study to another. By taking on a configurational approach inspired by Elias (1991), Lepesant pulls away from existing research and offers a much-needed synthesis of the complex body of social changes that have driven younger people born in the 1980s and 1990s to progressively develop common objectifiable features and a specific generational consciousness – which are not without important effects on the reconfiguration of the Taiwanese political and electoral environment. Beyond the role played by the new institutional, ideological, educational, and media-related order born out of democratisation and under which cohorts born in the 1980s and 1990s have been brought up, Lepesant also highlights important stages in the awareness and politicisation process of these cohorts, from the restricted politicisation of the early 2000s to the extended politicisation of the 2010s.

Despite their thematic diversity, the articles in this special feature allow us to identify transversal questions and unifying themes that may constitute a basis to further renew existing research on generations within the field of China studies and beyond. The first aspect worth mentioning is the authors’ efforts to pull away from generational analysis based on strictly defined cohorts, and to further understand generations as specific forms of collective identification born out of interactions and acts of narration. By focusing on the way people “talk and do generations” (Timonen and Conlon 2015), the articles enable us to consider generations less as stabilised, objectifiable social units than as acts of typification (Schütz 1964) born out of specific interactions and social configurations, and whose meanings and boundaries may change and give way to various interpretations according to where, when, and by whom they are expressed. Sun’s article, which points out the debates triggered by the “youth without regrets” label associated with *zhiqing*, constitutes a revealing example of the specific political circumstances leading some individuals to promote and endorse a (positive) generational label that actually contradicts their own (essentially negative) experience – here in the context of their relationship with the Chinese state in the aftermath of June 1989. The role of interactions between social groups is further put forward in several articles that point out the role of stigma, sometimes imposed on specific cohorts in the (re)shaping of a “we” identity defined through a process of stigma reversal, such as Lepesant’s description of the “(wild) strawberries” in Taiwan, or Rochot’s account of Chinese ageing women’s appropriation of the derogatory *dama* label. Moreover, Sun’s, Lepesant’s, Hong’s, and Rochot’s articles allow us to measure the crucial role played by the recent development of digital technologies – and thus

the intensified linking up of scattered individuals through online spaces where they can confront their shared experiences – in the recent enhancing of generational identifications, even among older cohorts, who actually prove to be extensive users of digital technologies. While this aspect has been largely absent from recent developments in the theories of generations, the contributions of this special feature, through their grounded approach, point out possible directions for new research.

An important issue tackled in the articles also concerns the link between ageing and generational consciousness, especially among China's currently ageing postwar cohorts. While researchers on China have already written a great deal of fascinating work on the youthful experiences and life course of cohorts born and brought up under the first years of the Mao era, especially on generational units of Red Guards and sent-down youths, the effect of ageing and retirement on the reconfiguration of their collective identifications and the role played by their interpretation of their own past in the emergence of new forms of collective actions at old age has been largely neglected. This is all the more regrettable in that, as theorists of generations have shown, "generational identity is expressed in the stories people tell about themselves and their lives," and such narratives play a particularly important role as people confront their ageing selves (Edmunds and Turner 2002: 181). The contributions in this issue therefore constitute a first step in filling this research gap. As shown in Hong's article on the blogs written by two former *zhiqing*, self and collective narratives – and therefore group identifications and boundaries – may indeed be subjected to change according to the present that individuals have to face: as such, "narratives of past suffering and heritage [can become] cognitive resources, enabling [individuals] to elaborate new schemes of the self in relations to others" (p. 22). Rochot also demonstrates that current challenges faced by retired one-child parents can actually contribute to reconfiguring generational identification beyond shared youthful trauma to include a larger set of (essentially gendered and urban) shared experiences related to their ageing and retirement. Among these shared experiences, the burden of grandparental duties in an era of shrinking childcare options plays an important role in the reconfiguration of group identifications, as also shown by Lin and Mao's article. As a whole, the ageing and retirement of the postwar Chinese cohorts, and the rereading of their own collective socialist past it involves, participates in shaping new forms of collective actions and social engagement – from the implication of former *zhiqing* mothers in LGBT advocacy to burgeoning online platforms where retired women speak up in the name of ageing cohorts of one-child parents. While such approaches linking ageing studies and generational analysis are emerging in China studies, they remain almost absent in other parts of the Sinophone world – a fact all the more regrettable now that new postwar cohorts of Taiwanese retirees, for example, have recently proven to be increasingly engaged in party politics and other forms of collective actions.

The growing attention paid to the ageing of postwar cohorts socialised under the Mao era, as illustrated in this special issue, more generally enriches the current academic literature on generations that increasingly focuses on the ageing of the "global generation" of "baby boomers" (Edmunds and Turner 2005; Bristow 2015, 2016) but rarely expands their interest beyond Western case studies. The examples given by Edmunds and Turner of "landslide events that entered a global consciousness," including the Vietnam War, President Kennedy's assassination, or the death of Princess Diana, although very local, are seen as still shaping the way in which "people who lived through them (...) define their time" (2002: 184). The collective historical turning points through which postwar cohorts read their life course and see as shared experiences shaping their group identification and present attitudes may, however, differ greatly in non-Western contexts, and within East Asian countries, despite the shared influence on individuals' life course of the Cold War and the fall of communism. As such, there is still a need to further research and compare the extent to which both local and global events, as well as forms of present experience in old age, participate in the (re)shaping of various scales of generational identification among postwar cohorts worldwide, including in historically diverging parts of the Sinophone world.

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