



## On the Sixth Generation: Preliminary Speculations about Chinese Politics after Xi

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### ABSTRACT

Contrary to the current tendency to extrapolate China's future trajectory from its current retrenchment, it is argued that China has changed substantially in the past and is likely to continue to change in the future. While change has always been strife-torn and radically contingent, it may be seen in retrospect to fit a rough pattern as occasioned by generational as well as ideological and developmental factors. Can we find clues in this pattern of change that provide some basis for speculation about China's future? A definition of 'generation,' is followed by a review of the past pattern of China's generational evolution and by a theory of generational change to account for it. The essay concludes with a discussion of China's path-dependent cyclical future evolution.

The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning . . . . China's future belongs to you.

—Mao Zedong (17 November 1957).

There has been a recent tendency, more in the popular than the scholarly literature, to view the origins of the Sino-American rift in teleological terms, as if it was clear all along, how could we have missed it? Yet change in China is aleatory, its history littered with confusing, contingent, unpredictable zigs and zags, sometimes tending to spin out of control. To give meaning to this inherently confusing pattern, Chinese have tended to conceive of change in generational terms—the May 4<sup>th</sup> generation, the Long March generation, the Yen'an generation, the War of Resistance against Japan generation. A generation represents a marriage between culture and history, combining vertical (diachronic) and horizontal (synchronic) dimensions in a clustering of shared experience and memory. This is to be sure not unknown elsewhere—in America there is the 'gen X,' the 'millennials,' and so forth. Yet such references seem to be more common and more meaningful in the People's Republic (PRC).<sup>1</sup> The reason has to do with the need for shared reference points amid the dizzying pace of growth. The last 30 years have witnessed one of the greatest economic transformations in human history, as over a billion Chinese were lifted from a basic standard of living (GDP per capita of US\$132 in 1962) to upper middle-income status (US\$6,894.50 per capita in 2016). And in contrast to earlier economic transformations, such as the Industrial Revolution in Britain, where the increase stretched over a century and was barely perceptible to those involved, the transformation in China has been highly visible (no doubt helping account for the regime's popularity, but also contributing to the sense of dislocation).

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<sup>1</sup>For an insightful overview, see Lance Gore, 'Scanning the Post-Xi Jinping Political Landscape: Towards an Analytic Framework of Generational Leadership Change in Post-Deng China' (paper presented at an eponymous seminar at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, February 22, 2019).

Chinese politics has undergone major upheavals about every decade for the past century and a half—from the Opium War in 1840 and the Taiping Rebellion in 1850 to the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the launching of reform and opening in 1978, and the Tiananmen Incident of 1989. While the deeply embedded Confucian ethic in China implies that such generation ‘gaps’ as Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* or Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* are relatively rare, the socio-economic context of permanent revolution has made it hard for the generations to understand one another.<sup>2</sup> The historical determinism adopted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) optimistically welcomes change as inevitable, and a cadre who continues to adhere to the values imbibed in an earlier generation and fails to adjust with the times as interpreted by the CCP runs serious risk of being criticized for having committed ‘serious errors’ and purged. Yet the CCP is also in principle opposed to changes that do not fit into its predetermined narrative and dogmatic guidance. Still the Chinese people have always needed some way to relate to one another outside the ideologically formalized ranks of the CCP. People sharing the same generation (‘cohorts’) help facilitate this.

Most discussions of China’s future leadership generation focus naturally enough on the comparative assessment of different potential successors: Princeling or *Youth League faction*? Hu Chunhua or Chen Min’er? Succession scenario analysis is all very well, but difficult to do in this case. For one thing, Xi Jinping has systematically eliminated potential successors from any position from which one could reasonably be expected to succeed. For another, by making clear his own intention to remain in office indefinitely, he has pushed succession so far into the future it is difficult to schedule a plausible lineup.<sup>3</sup> This study pursues a different approach. No one can know the future, particularly in the context of such a tumultuous history, but by looking at China’s history of generational change, perhaps we can detect a pattern that will hold true at least to the extent that the future resembles the past. The first section will focus on the nature and logic of generation theory in general. This will be followed by a review of the literature in an attempt to apply the concept of generations to China. In the third section we turn to the current ‘fifth’ generation led by Xi Jinping, and offer some tentative speculations about the sixth.

## Generations

The premise of generation theory is that there is a particular phase in human life when a person is particularly susceptible to the socio-economic-political environment. This was not the period of early childhood on which Freud and other psychoanalysts focused attention but the period of late adolescence in the late teens and early twenties, when the young adult typically leaves the parental family, completes education, finds a profession and career path, starts a family, and establishes a distinct identity. The relative importance of this period was defined by Erik Erikson as one of ‘identity crisis.’<sup>4</sup> Implicit in the

<sup>2</sup>See also Sophocles, *The Oedipus Cycle; Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus Antigone* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1941); Thomas Wolfe, *You Can’t Go Home Again* (New York: Scribner, 2011 pbk ed.); etc. the theme of generational conflict is pervasive throughout Western literature.

<sup>3</sup>Xi’s juxtaposition in a recent speech of the PRC’s first 30 years (Mao Zedong’s period) and the second 30 years (Deng Xiaoping’s period—pointedly ignoring any ‘period’ for Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao- and the christening of ‘Xi Jinping’s new era’ of socialism with Chinese characteristics leads one to assume he may intend to rule for the next 30 years. Central Party History Research Office, ‘Correctly view the two historical periods prior to and after reform and opening up’ [Zhèngquè kàndài gǎigé kāifàng qiánhòu liǎng gè lìshǐ shíqī], *Renmin Ribao*, November 8, 2013, accessed June 20, 2019, <http://www.people.com.cn>; as cited by Joseph Fewsmith, ‘The 19th Party Congress: Ringing in Xi Jinping’s New Age’, *China Leadership Monitor* 55, (2018), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup>Erikson first proposed his theory of identity crisis in the 1930s to account for the emergence from youth to adulthood in such seminal figures as Martin Luther, Michelangelo, Jesus, and Mohandas Gandhi, and later extended the idea to ‘eight stages of life,’ each of them marked by crisis. In this he deviated from Freud by moving away from what he called his ‘originological fallacy’ of focusing on the first five years of life to the inclusion of youth and adulthood. By ‘crisis’ he meant not necessarily overwhelming stress but a turning point when one is compelled to make a binary choice, the choice of late adolescence being between ‘role confusion’ and ‘identity.’ Although the term has since been very widely adopted throughout the social sciences, the primary focus has remained on the crisis of blossoming maturity when one must choose an occupation, a mate, and a life course. See Erik H. Erikson, ‘Hitler’s Imagery and Germany Youth’, *Psychiatry* 5, (1942), pp. 475–493; Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), pp. 16–17; Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963 ed.), Erik H. Erikson, *Life History and the Historical Moment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975); Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (NY: W. W. Norton, 1980 ed.).

concept is the assumption that an individual's political worldview, once crystalized in early adulthood, does not normally undergo substantial change during the course of one's subsequent life.<sup>5</sup> This assumption has strong empirical support, and not only in a Western cultural context.<sup>6</sup> It is further assumed that the cohort born within the same two or three decades, having been exposed to the same set of salient events while growing to maturity, will internalize those events as part of their enduring worldview, share them, and proceed to act on them.<sup>7</sup> Although a generation is typically clustered in a 20 year period, this time span is only approximate, for a generation is also defined by the salient public events that 'brand' it as a common reference point for that cohort, making one generation meaningfully different from another. Naturally not everyone will draw the same lessons from this pivotal event. As Karl Mannheim, a pioneer of generation theory, put it, within the same generation there will be different 'generation units.'<sup>8</sup> A given generation may be subdivided into philosophical, class, partisan, ethno-religious, and other horizontal distinctions.

In a given society at any given time there will thus be an admixture of several generations, each having gone through a somewhat distinctive cultural imprinting experience. This may give rise to rolling intergenerational tensions, particularly in a context of rapid socio-economic change. The classic generation 'gap' is between the old and the young. The older generation is generally assumed to be conservative and the younger liberal or radical—Kemal Atatürk's 'young Turks.' But this is not necessarily the case. The right-wing fascist and Nazi movements consisted of relatively young people (usually male), rebelling against a more civil and democratic older generation. The PRC regime is somewhat distinctive in three respects: first, the CCP has a canonical ideology that is based on the assumption of constant change, but feels impelled to interpret that change from a moral perspective relative to a doctrinally predetermined historical trajectory: class struggle leading from feudalism to capitalism, to socialism, to communism. Second, the PRC is an authoritarian order governed by an all-encompassing Communist Party determined to eliminate generational or indeed any other type of deviation from that historical destiny. Third, Chinese traditional culture (which the CCP has now embraced), under the influence of Confucian filial piety, sanctifies the authority of the Father (and his political analogs, representing the older generation). The cumulative impact of these three features is to adhere faithfully to a predetermined path as interpreted by the CCP and to suppress generational tensions and smooth out the historical trajectory. Yet the impact of these features should not be exaggerated. Although the Party-state is no doubt sincere about its transformational mission and has monopoly control of an impressive domestic security apparatus and a comprehensive communications network to implement it, experience has shown that the best it has been able to achieve is a certain surface conformity. This is illustrated inter alia by the revival of Confucianism after the death of Mao Zedong, or the unexpected flowering of innovative ideas from a hitherto low-profile apparatchik named Xi Jinping upon his arrival at the top.

The consensus of China watchers is that even this superficial conformity has been diminishing over the past several decades, inspiring increasingly rigorous (and technologically enhanced) efforts by the regime to discipline and 'stabilize' society.

<sup>5</sup>Sara Kiesler; James N Morgan; Valerie Kincade Oppenheimer, eds. *Aging: Social Change* (New York: Academic Press), pp. 183–204; David O. Sears, 'The persistence of early political predispositions: The roles of attitude object and life stage', In Ladd Wheeler; Phillip R Shaver(eds.), *Review of Personality and Social Psychology* 4, (1983), pp. 79–116. There are however adult exceptions, occasioned for example by traumatic experience—Saul on the road to Damascus, Deng Xiaoping's exposure to hardscrabble peasant life when he was sent down during the Cultural Revolution (interesting, though, that Xi Jinping drew quite different lessons from the same traumatic experience).

<sup>6</sup>See for example Erik H. Erikson, 'Observations on Sioux Education', *Journal of Psychology* 7, (1939), pp. 101–156; Erik H. Erikson, *Observations on the Yurok: Childhood and World Image* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Publications in American Archaeological Ethnology, 1943).

<sup>7</sup>Marvin Rintala, 'A Generation in Politics: A Definition', *The Review of Politics* 25(4), (1963), pp. 509–522.

<sup>8</sup>See Karl Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Karl Mannheim (London: Routledge, 1928/1952), pp. 276–322.

## Chinese Generations

Let us concede at the outset that a political generation is inherently difficult to analyze with any precision. Given that a generation is defined not only by a stipulated time span but by some defining pivotal event, and that interpretations of that event may vary among members of that generation, is it conceivable that there may be nearly as much variation within as between variations? Inasmuch as the term has been a popular as well as an analytic one there has also been some intersubjective disagreement about the definition and periodization of generations. In view of such methodological difficulties, generational analysis has not been in the forefront of recent political scientific analysis. (But then of course China notoriously poses other problems for scientific analysis, such as the accessibility and reliability of quantitative data.)

That said, the core tenets of generation theory have been tested and confirmed in a broad cross-national context.<sup>9</sup> Although not as yet by the original theorists, over the years there has been a cumulative body of impressive empirical work on Chinese generations using a variety of techniques, from survey research to discourse analysis.<sup>10</sup> Among the earliest was by William ('Whit') Whitson, in his 1967 analysis of military generations, which we briefly summarize here as an exemplary pioneer though it concerns a specialized occupational group at an earlier time period.<sup>11</sup> He defines a 'military generation' as a group of men 'who entered the military during a particular period characterized by a crisis of professional feat or professional famine' and who thus come to share a particular military 'ethic and style.' He divides the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into 10 generations divided into the decade in which they came of age or entered service, the last four of which emerge in the post-Liberation era. Namely (7) October 1950–September 1954, very patriotic, filled with volunteers eager to fight in Korea; (8) October 1954–September 1959 the height of learning from the Soviet experience; (9) October 1959–December 1963, a generation that experienced the de-Sovietization and Maoization of the PLA under the new leadership of Lin Biao; and (10) January 1964–January 1967, dominated by the Cultural Revolution, in which the PLA became actively involved as the last stable bulwark of central control, replacing bureaucratic administration by the decimated CCP. But due largely to actuarial factors, the last four generations play little role in Whitson's account. Whitson concludes that though PLA history exhibited relatively high mobility and mortality rates,<sup>12</sup> leadership was capped by a frozen command—of the 400 leading military officials he could identify in 1967, 96 percent had entered before December 1936 (i.e., they belonged to the first three generations, before 1936). Although the Cultural Revolution broke the log-jam in promotions since 1954, most victims were in the first two generations (1923–November 1931), while the main beneficiaries were third generation veterans (activated December 1931–December 1936).

<sup>9</sup>Cf. especially Ronald F. Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Ronald F. Inglehart "After Postmaterialism: An Essay on China, Russia and the United States," *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers Cadien de Sociologie* 41(2), (2016), p. 213.

<sup>10</sup>See for example Ruth Cherrington, 'Generational Issues in China: A Case Study of the 1930s Generation of Young Intellectuals', *British Journal of Sociology*, 48(2), (1997), pp. 302–320; Yarong Jiang and David Ashley (particularly the foreword by Stanley Rosen), *Mao's Children in the New China: Voices from the Red Guard Generation* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Robert Harmel and Yao-Yuan Yeh, 'China's Age Cohorts: Differences in Political Attitudes and Behavior', *Social Science Quarterly* 96(1), (2015), pp. 214–234; Katherine Bischooping and Zhipeng Gao, 'Reframing Generations Scholarship through the Eyes of Ordinary Chinese', *Chinese Sociological Dialogue* 3(2), (2018), pp. 133–147; Joseph Fewsmith, 'Generational Transition in China', *The Washington Quarterly* 25(4), (2002), pp. 23–35; Carolyn P. Egri and David A. Ralston, 'Generational Cohorts and Personal Values: A Comparison of China and the United States', *Organization Science* 15(2), (2004), pp. 210–220; Robert L. Moore, 'Generation Ku: Individualism and China's Millennial Youth', *Ethnology* 44(4), (2005), pp. 357–376; Cheng Li, *China's Fifth Generation: Is Diversity a Source of Strength or Weakness?* (National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Project Report, September 2008); Michel Bonnin, 'The Threatened History and Collective Memory of the Cultural Revolution's Lost Generation', *China Perspectives* 4(72), (2007), pp. 52–64; Michael Yahuda, 'Political Generations in China', *The China Quarterly* 30, (1979), pp. 793–805.

<sup>11</sup>William W. Whitson, 'The concept of military generation: the Chinese Communist case', *Asian Survey* 8(11), (1978).

<sup>12</sup>In 1960 Mao told Edgar Snow that 50,000 cadres in 1927 had been reduced to 10,000 by the summer of 1928, of whom only 4,000 remained alive in 1930. Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 129.

As noted the Chinese military has its own distinctive subculture, and most of the Chinese generation literature is concerned not with military elites but with civilian society. The general consensus of this literature is that five generations have played a meaningful role in post-Liberation Chinese politics to date. They are:

- (1) The first, or founding generation, also known as the Long March generation, often referred to in Chinese media as the ‘heroes generation’ (*yidai yinghao*). This generation included Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun inter al. some of whom remained active in CCP leadership through the Cultural Revolution and beyond. These were rebel heroes, who found it necessary to break with old traditions in order to create a political brave new world. They often betrayed their families, their education and their arranged marriages. As one author put it, there was no authority they could not overthrow, no myth they would not question. This revolutionary generation had extraordinary self-confidence across a full spectrum of issues derived from years of political activity and from the widely accepted belief that their improbable victory in the revolution legitimized their rule. They are also seen as a romantic generation, as their struggle required unlimited imagination. They were convinced that human volition could be transformed into material power capable of overcoming virtually any opposing force—as in the Long March of 1934–1935, survival of Japanese counterinsurgency warfare, victory over a then vastly superior Republican army. Despite some horrendous failures after achieving power, notably the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), this generation has commanded and continues to command respect because of its revolutionary achievements.
- (2) The successor generation, which came of age during the first 17 years of the People’s Republic and rose (those who rose) to positions of authority by the 1980s, was a more passive generation, inadvertently enabling the heroic adventurism of their revolutionary leaders. This generation of ‘loyal soldiers’ did not have the choices available to the first generation. A member of a subsequent generation somewhat ungenerously characterized their forebears as ‘gloomy’, as ‘sheep’, ‘unable to make trouble’ with an undeveloped sense of the self: ‘They daren’t do anything the leaders don’t allow. Now very few people care what leaders say anymore. [*sic*] They are not tame anymore.’ Those who joined the Communist Youth League and undertook careers in the Party were no doubt idealists, inspired by a rapid-fire series of campaigns designed to construct socialism, from land reform to the Great Leap, but they were also embarking on a bureaucratic career path. Rather than ‘overturning heaven and earth’ in their effort to remake the social order and propel China into the modern world, the successor generation ascended by rising through the bureaucracies and by not offending people. The only time this generation showed independent thought was during the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1956–1957, when many intellectuals raised criticisms of Party and government officials. After the anti-rightist movement of 1957, all such dissident voices were stilled. Those who became cadres adopted a more cautious style of politics that put greater weight on consensus building. Better educated and more technocratic than their revolutionary predecessors, this generation sought to craft policies and govern more efficiently rather than to strike out in bold new political directions.<sup>13</sup>
- (3) The next ‘third’ generation differed as much from the second as the second from the first. The early constituents, sometimes called the ‘*laosanjie*’ (old three classes) became Red Guards or Revolutionary Rebels.<sup>14</sup> Having broken with Western influences and endured Party discipline while absorbing nothing but revolutionary rhetoric for the past seventeen

<sup>13</sup>Joseph Fewsmith, ‘Generational Transition in China’, *The Washington Quarterly* 25(4), (2002), pp. 23–35; Joseph Fewsmith, *Elite Politics in Contemporary China* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001).

<sup>14</sup>This refers to the high school graduates of the classes 1966–1968 who missed these years of school, many of whom were then sent down to the countryside in the *shangshan xiafang* [up to the mountains and down to the countryside] movement. Students were aged between 14 and 20. See Nora Sausmikat, ‘Generations, Legitimacy and Political Ideas in China: The End of Polarization or the End of Ideology?’ *Asian Survey* 43(2), (2003), pp. 352–384; also Eva P. W. Hung and Stephen W. K. Chiu, ‘The Lost Generation: Life Course Dynamics and Xiagang in China’, *Modern China* 29(2), (2003), pp. 204–236.

years, this generation was ready to explode in chaotic initiative under the vague empowering aegis of Mao Zedong Thought. A movement based on equality, ideological conformity, and self-sacrifice became a crusade which, after ‘toppling’ some two-thirds of China’s incumbent cadres, turned on itself, descending into anarchic factionalism.<sup>15</sup> Deeply dismayed by this chaotic turn of events (he reportedly wept), Mao imposed de facto military rule and sent over seventeen million young people down to the countryside to learn from the peasants [*zai jiaoyu*]. Yet if Mao was disappointed, these young people were still more so. A generation full of idealism and passion for noble causes soon became a ‘lost generation,’ sent down to the countryside for the rest of their lives, deprived of education, facing dismal promotion chances following the return to power of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, many were afflicted by pessimism and a low sense of political efficacy. The best of this generation however passed university entrance exams when they were reinstated in 1977 (on a highly competitive basis) and threw themselves into their studies with great vigor. Some then became involved in early rural reforms, others became economists or social scientists. Others still tried stubbornly to continue to pursue the political vision that the Cultural Revolution had unleashed, becoming active in Democracy Wall (1978) or later spontaneous mass mobilizational initiatives, including the June 4<sup>th</sup> protests. Most of the latter were liberal or radical, typified by Yang Xiguang or the Li Yizhe trio,<sup>16</sup> but some turned conservative, like Xiao Gongqin, a theorist of authoritarian transition.<sup>17</sup> If we must generalize, this was a liberated but malcontent generation.

- (4) The ‘reform generation’ consisted of those who were born in the 1960s and came of age following the inauguration of ‘reform and opening’ at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenum of the 11<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in late 1978, which commenced a process of gradual, stealthy reversal of most of the policies of the previous decade. Deng Xiaoping’s policies encouraged individual achievement, materialism, economic efficiency, and entrepreneurship. In the 1980s the ‘intellectuals’ were rescued from their status as ‘stinking 9<sup>th</sup> category’ during the Cultural Revolution and designated as part of the working class. Indeed, intellectuals became to some extent the new modal personality, as merit superseded activism as the dominant criterion for bureaucratic promotion and the majority of the Party’s Central Committee boasted higher education credentials—especially in engineering. Pragmatism (black cat, white cat) was in command because no one knew exactly how to ‘cross the river,’ and local policy innovation was ubiquitous. Members of this generation were generally confident about their own abilities and ready to play an important role in Chinese society. In contrast to the passivity of the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation and the extremism and lack of common sense of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, the reform generation saw themselves as recouping the traditional roles of intellectuals in Chinese society, e.g., as advisors to the leadership, or as the national conscience. Respondents however frequently described themselves as a frustrated, in search of ways of suitably fulfilling their perceived role without coming into conflict with the older generation. This frustration was to be acted out in spontaneous mass protest movements beginning in the fall of 1986 and climaxing in 1989 at Tiananmen.<sup>18</sup>
- (5) The fifth, ‘post-reform generation’ consists of those born in the reform era and growing up in the aftermath of the crackdown at Tiananmen in 1989. This was the ‘one child’ generation (the ‘one child policy’ was adopted in 1979), the generation of ‘small emperors’ [*xiao huangdi*], also the ‘internet generation’ most affected by ‘globalization.’ This is the ‘ku’ generation—not as in *chi ku*, for which they were allegedly unprepared, but as derived

<sup>15</sup>Egri and Ralston, ‘Generational,’ p. 212.

<sup>16</sup>Wang Xizhe, ‘Mao Zedong yu wenhua geming,’ [‘Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution’], *Shida,i*, Hong Kong, February 1981.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Bonnin, ‘Threatened History’; Yang Fan, *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo de Disandai Ren* (The Third Generation of the People’s Republic of China) (Chengdu: Chengdu renmin chubanshe, 1991); Thomas Bernstein’s classic, *Up to the Mountains, Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1977).

<sup>18</sup>Cherrington, pp. 318 ff.; Beverly Hooper, ‘Chinese Youth: The Nineties Generation,’ *Current History, China*, (1991), pp. 264–269.

from the English slang term ‘cool,’ connoting modernity and individualism.<sup>19</sup> This is a generation marked by such characteristics as “selfish,” “self-centered,” “rebellious,” “anti-traditional,” “uncooperative,” “lazy,” and “irresponsible,” but also characterized by ‘strong self-confidence, diverse interests, and strong need for self-improvement’ and ‘more tolerant to differences, including differences in values and lifestyles.’<sup>20</sup> This is a generation able to hold contradictory values in their heads at the same time: idealistic and self-interested, patriotic yet eager to study and work abroad. And the more they learn about the outside world, the more nationalistic they become. Harmel and Yeh infer from their compilation of survey data that representatives of this generation have a relatively high sense of political efficacy and are hence willing to disagree with conventional wisdom, to experiment with new ideas, to criticize the status quo.<sup>21</sup> But other researchers find this generation to be ‘spoiled.’ Obsessed with consumption, particularly consumer electronics (‘apple fans’ *guofen*, ‘thumb tribe’ *muzhi zu*), apolitical and unused to hardship, they are characterized as having the unique inability to ‘eat bitterness’ (*chiku*). They are called ‘strawberries’ (*caomei*)—polished and attractive in outward appearance but highly vulnerable and easily wounded.<sup>22</sup>

Belonging to this cohort chronologically but a bit more selective is the elite corps of students who have had the opportunity to study abroad and then return to China, referred to as ‘sea turtles’ [*haigui*]. According to Cheng Li, from 1978–2014, ca. 3,518,400 Chinese students and scholars have studied in 108 countries and regions all over the world, most of them in the United States.<sup>23</sup> A growing number of these scholars have returned to China, especially since 1998, when 7,379 came home; in 2006 He Li estimated that altogether 200,000 had returned.<sup>24</sup> In the past, returned students have played a significant role in China’s modernization, often in leadership positions; e.g., Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai, and Jiang Zemin all studied abroad. And Cheng Li is optimistic about their political prospects, pointing out for example that the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2012 included ca. 120 scholars, most of whom had foreign study backgrounds. Foreign-educated returnees comprised 6.2 percent of full or alternate membership of the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress (2002), 10.5 percent of the 17<sup>th</sup> Congress (in 2007), and 14.6 percent of the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress.<sup>25</sup> One should perhaps not expect these new sea turtles to have the same dramatic impact on CCP leadership as Zhou Enlai or Jiang Zemin, for three reasons. First, the vast majority of the students selected for study abroad focus on science or engineering, not social science.<sup>26</sup> Second, while the previous generation of returned students were educated in ideologically compatible countries (predominantly the Soviet Union), the current crop has overwhelmingly preferred to study in democratic countries, particularly the US. Finally, like the rest of their cohort, most *haigui* have expressed little interest in politics.<sup>27</sup> They are more likely to find better life chances in the academic or scientific research worlds.<sup>28</sup> Still there are some outstanding exceptions. Vice Premier

<sup>19</sup>Moore, ‘Generation Ku,’ p. 358.

<sup>20</sup>Xiang Yi, Barbara Ribbens and Caryn N. Morgan, ‘Generational Differences in China: Career Implications,’ *Career Development International* 15(6), (2010), pp. 601–20.

<sup>21</sup>Harmel and Yeh, ‘China’s Age Cohorts,’ pp. 227–230.

<sup>22</sup>Karita Kan, ‘The New “Lost Generation”: Inequality and Discontent among Chinese Youth,’ *China Perspective* 2(94), (2013), pp. 67–73.

<sup>23</sup>Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2016), p. 139.

<sup>24</sup>He Li, ‘Returned Students and Political Change in China,’ *Asian Perspective* 30(2), (2006), pp. 5–29.

<sup>25</sup>Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics*, pp. 148–149. In 2015, 90 percent of science and engineering (S&E) Chinese PhDs from U.S. universities over the past 10 years had opted to remain, while 85 percent of the number over the past 5 years opted to remain—the percentage remaining had declined, but was still higher than the average for all foreign S&E PhDs. National Science Foundation, *Science and Engineering Indicators, 2018*, Table 3–28, accessed June 20, 2019, <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2018/nsb20181/report/sections/science-and-engineering-labor-force/immigration-and-the-s-e-workforce#short-term-stay-rates-for-u-s-s-e-doctorate-recipients>; Huiyao Wang, *Zhongguo Liuxue Fazhan Baogao (2016) [Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Students Abroad (2016)]*, Center for China and Globalization, 2016, accessed June 20, 2019, <http://www.ccg.org.cn/Research/View.aspx?Id=7164>.

<sup>26</sup>Huiyao Wang, *Zhongguo Liuxue Fazhan Baogao(2016) [Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Students Abroad (2016)]*, Center for China and Globalization, 2016, accessed June 20, 2019, <http://www.ccg.org.cn/Research/View.aspx?Id=7164>.

Liu He (recently engaged in high-level trade negotiations with the Trump administration) has an MA from the Harvard Kennedy School, and Wang Huning, now a Politburo Standing Committee member, spent six months as a visiting scholar in the US.

## Patterns

When we compare the generations what is immediately striking is how different they are. This is doubtless because of the very rapid pace of growth in China, as a result of which each generation comes in to a new and different world. But do these differences fit any discernible pattern? Psychologists state that age-based variation in political attitudes and behavior can be explained by two factors: life-cycle change (young vs. old) and generational change; i.e., intra-generational vs. intergenerational change.<sup>29</sup> The life-cycle pattern is familiar: the young are bold and open to fresh experience, the old more conservative and closed-minded. In terms of intra-generational change (i.e., life-cycle based change), available Chinese survey data does support the inverted U-curve found in Western polities, in which political interest and engagement crests during the identity crisis phase of early adulthood and tends to decline monotonically thereafter. But life-cycle theory can explain only the intensity of political engagement (e.g., voting, in democratic polities) in quantitative terms without specifying its quality, specifically the political values being embraced or opposed. Ronald F. Inglehart is among the few researchers to have delved into the question of intergenerational change, with his widely tested generational identity theory.<sup>30</sup> According to Inglehart, generations create the overall value framework within which life-cycles take place. That is to say, a generation as defined by the socialization experiences of early youth and the values they embrace serve as a kind of gyroscope for life cycles within that generation.

What types of experiences are decisive in forming a given generation's identity? Inglehart proposes two hypotheses: (1) the 'scarcity hypothesis'; i.e., the greatest subjective value is placed on those socioeconomic environmental values that were in short supply during a generation's youth. Low supply incurs high subsequent demand as the younger generation strives to compensate for perceived deprivations. Thus, generations growing up during periods of socioeconomic and physical insecurity (e.g., social upheaval, war, economic depression) learn modernist values (e.g., rationality, materialism, conformity, individualism and respect for authority). Generations growing up during periods of socioeconomic prosperity and security, on the other hand, learn postmodernist values (e.g., egalitarianism, environmentalism, interpersonal trust, tolerance of diversity, self-transcendence). Implicit is the assumption that the most significant value at stake is *materialism*, and that satisfaction of materialist needs leads naturally to a deemphasis of materialism and a progression to post-materialist values (e.g., environmentalism). It is proposed here however that *any* human value in scarce supply may foster a compensatory generational emphasis on satisfying that need. (2) the 'socialization hypothesis' posits that the experiences of one's formative years will leave a lasting imprint.

If we apply scarcity theory to the Chinese experience, the variance in China's five identifiable generations begins to fit a discernible pattern. The first generation of battle-tested revolutionary romantics is followed by a 'successor generation' most interested in consolidation and security. The third generation is then inspired to rebel against heaven and earth in a quest to revitalize revolutionary values. The fourth, reform generation is most interested in relief from revolutionary turmoil and a transition to economic development: 'stability above all' [*wending ya dao yiqie*]. And

<sup>27</sup>He Li, 'Returned Students and Political Change in China,' *Asian Perspective* 30(2), (2006), pp. 5–29; David Zweig and Stanley Rosen, 'How China trained a new generation abroad', *Sci Dev Net*, May 22, 2003, accessed June 20, 2019, <https://www.scidev.net/global/migration/feature/how-china-trained-a-new-generation-abroad.html>.

<sup>28</sup>E.g., cf. the careers of Pan Wei, at Peking University, and Yan Xuetong, at Tsinghua, both distinguished political scientists, have Berkeley PhDs.

<sup>29</sup>Harmel and Yeh, 'China's Age Cohorts', pp. 214ff.

<sup>30</sup>Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*, 1997; Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution: Peoples' Motivations are Changing, and Transforming the World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).



the fifth generation has shown contradictory tendencies. It is open to new experience and eager to learn about the world, but domestic politics has set limits on political experiments that they are bound to respect. And the 5<sup>th</sup> generation may have a high sense of political efficacy and an interest in freedom of speech and other such advanced ideas but Xi Jinping has taken a diametrically contrary political course. For Xi Jinping does not belong to the 5<sup>th</sup> generation but the 3<sup>rd</sup> 'Red Guard' generation.<sup>31</sup>

This introduces the complicating issue of the role of political authority. The empirical literature we have reviewed above (excepting Whitson) focuses on the 'broad masses,' but what is the relationship of these generations to their political leadership? A one-to-one relationship cannot really be expected, for while we define generations by the years in which they come of age their leaders are generally much older—typically at least the age of their parents. This is one reason the familial generation gap often finds an echo in the political arena. Rather than a direct correlation, we are apt to find a generation lag or gap between the masses and their political leadership. The leadership, having grown up with a particular set of formative experiences, tries to impart the values and convictions derived therefrom to the younger generation, and often encounters resistance. Thus for example the first generation was fired with revolutionary enthusiasm by a charismatic leadership to plunge headlong into socialism, while the Chinese masses in the second, successor generation were in desperate straits in the wake of foreign and civil wars, dire poverty, political chaos and economic hyperinflation. In this case the generational gap may have been functionally complementary, as the relative docility of the masses facilitated the bold leaps of the Maoist leadership. On the other hand the third generation of pent-up Cultural Revolutionary youth found a complementary match in Mao's surprising decision to break with his colleagues in a quest to recapture the spirit of revolutionary idealism, with consequences that have been consensually adjudged to be nationally catastrophic. Although Deng Xiaoping as a Long March veteran would normally be considered a member of the first generation, in a sense Mao cut him out during the Cultural Revolution when he purged him and sent him down the countryside to repair tractors. After his third comeback in 1977, Deng promoted himself to the core of the second generation and anointed Jiang Zemin as core of the third in order to confirm the line of generational succession (and to draw a subtle line between his own and his predecessor's policies). As representative of the second leadership generation, his own brief experience as a sent down cadre enabled him to introduce a pragmatic new policy line more compatible with the perceived needs of the fourth mass generation. The intervening variable in this dialectical intergenerational dynamic is the Leninist Party-state, which is staffed by cadre-bureaucrats trained to see themselves as faithful agents of the Party.

Leadership and staff is where our second causal factor, socialization, comes into play. A given generation's disposition is not determined simply by whether its needs are satisfied, but how members are socialized to interpret those needs. And socialization is not just a matter of social interaction, for some have more power to shape socialization than others, and in an authoritarian order like China's, ruled by a monopolistic, hierarchical Party-state, that power is vast. We can illustrate the consequences with reference to the ambivalence of the post-Tiananmen fifth generation. This generation appears on the scene at the crest of the Chinese economic miracle. These youths experienced a great leap in material prosperity: in aggregate terms, real urban income more than doubled between 1989 and 2000, while China became the world's factory and economic locomotive, number 1 trading nation and world's largest GDP (in purchasing power parity). As only children, they were indeed 'spoiled,' endowed with more privileges and opportunities than any previous generation. On the other hand, they lived in the shadow of Tiananmen. They had no living memories of the 'incident' nor were they able to read about it in China's official media, but they

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<sup>31</sup>But no Red Guard: Xi was disqualified from joining because his father was at the time in political disgrace. Young Jinping was hence alienated from both left and right, unable to 'rebel,' able to survive and climb only by outstanding dedication to Mao Zedong Thought, and he has remained 'redder than red' ever since.

knew something terrible and fearsome had occurred. This was the ‘anaconda in the chandelier,’ the sword of Damocles, the vague symbol of an all-powerful authority that could reappear with fatal consequences under unspecified circumstances.<sup>32</sup> So while these youths are indeed innovative, experimental, technologically adroit, self-confident and ambitious, as a rule they have been very careful not to cross any political ‘red lines.’

## Conclusions

The Chinese Communist Party is dedicated to progressive historical change. While theoretically recognizing that change is a dialectical process, the CCP has over the years arrived at a methodology to eliminate historical deviations (‘revisionism’) from the Party and exorcise those who make them so that the forces of progress will prevail, smoothing out (‘harmonizing’) history. Yet the history of the CCP has been extraordinarily choppy, veering from one extreme to the other. We have posited that environmental factors specific to each generation contribute to these cyclical changes. Each generation will assess the values in critical scarcity and prioritize overcoming these shortages. Due to the time lapse between mass and leadership generations amid a changing environment, this may involve conflict between (or within) generations and a staggered pattern of transformation as one generation attempts to preserve stability while its successors strain for change.

And what of the future? In view of the multifaceted nature of the current fifth generation, predicting the sixth is difficult. We do not even know how long the fifth generation will last—Xi Jinping may wish his ‘new era’ to last 30 years, but who knows? Hitler’s Third Reich was intended to last a thousand years. Whatever its life span, if we assume the sixth generation has a logical relationship to values in perceptibly in short supply during the fifth, what do we find?

This necessitates a preliminary inventory of the values the current regime has emphasized and those it has not. Above all, what the Xi Jinping regime has prioritized thus far is a strong emphasis on public morality. Xi Jinping started his anticorruption campaign immediately after his accession and it has maintained a fierce momentum ever since, disciplining over a million officials during his first term, including ‘tigers’ as well as ‘flies.’ His goal seems to be to restore moral legitimacy to China’s CCP leadership. He has proceeded in three ways. First by detaining, publicly humiliating and punishing corrupt officials, both within the Party and via the legal apparatus.<sup>33</sup> Second, by reorganizing and more generously funding the ‘stability maintenance’ and propaganda networks, for use both domestically and abroad. The nature of the moral values implicit in Marxism is still unclear (‘class struggle’ as a basis for moral evaluation was largely discredited during the Deng Xiaoping era); hence Xi Jinping turned back to traditional [*chuantong*] Chinese morality, particularly the Confucian admonition that the ‘people’ are the most important thing and that the leadership should lead through moral example. Through his frequent informal personal public appearances Xi has reinforced the notion that he is personally a morally exemplary leader who cares for the people’s welfare. Xi made around 50 domestic inspection tours during his first term, spending 151 days on tour. Second, by strengthening the domestic security apparatus he has attempted to eliminate access to competing ideological narratives.<sup>34</sup> In foreign affairs, Xi Jinping has put China on the global power map with his bold words and cautious steps to enforce China’s long-held territorial claims to its geographical periphery and to project Chinese economic power throughout Eurasia via a visionary infrastructure construction program, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Such policies may be viewed as an outlet for Chinese feelings of self-confidence and international

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<sup>32</sup>See Perry Link, ‘China: The Anaconda in the Chandelier,’ *The New York Review of Books*, as republished in *China File*, April 11, 2002, accessed June 20, 2019, <http://www.chinafile.com/library/nyrb-china-archive/china-anaconda-chandelier>.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Flora Sapio, ‘Shuanggui and Extralegal Detention in China,’ *China Information*, March 1, 2008, accessed June 20, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X07087720>.

<sup>34</sup>In 2013 the regime introduced Central Document No. 9 and launched a campaign against ‘constitutionalism,’ in July 2015 hundreds of human rights lawyers were arrested; and the regime has enacted strict laws regulating non-governmental organizations, religious practices and online speech.

outreach, an ambitious and more powerful revival of Deng Xiaoping's 'opening to the outside world.' Between 2014 and 2016, China's total trade volume in the countries along the Belt and Road exceeded \$3 trillion, according to Chinese figures, created \$1.1 billion revenues and 180,000 jobs for the countries involved. It has encountered resistance in the West and some clients have had financing difficulties but the BRI has been welcomed by most of its clients among small emerging nations. If it is successful this will make China more secure and strong and enhance its international stature. Third, Xi has placed unprecedented emphasis on environmental protection. China ratified the Paris Agreement on climate change in 2016 and although China still has a long way to go its energy consumption patterns are gradually shifting toward the use of renewable, less polluting energy sources. Fourth, the regime has vowed to eliminate poverty in China by 2021. The government's spending on poverty doubled during Xi's first term, lifting more than 55 million people above the poverty line from 2013 to 2016 (although the country's income gaps have widened). Finally, the regime has begun and is making progress toward reorienting the economy away from an exclusive focus on GDP growth steered mainly by state-directed fixed capital investment and toward a consumption-driven and service-oriented economy. With 'Made in China: 2025' he has endeavored to make China a global leader in ten emerging technologies, including 5G, robotics, autonomous vehicles, quantum computing, etc. The number of tech 'unicorns'—startups valued at more than US\$1 billion—has grown from fewer than 10 to more than 50 in just three years (2015–2018).

What is missing from this picture? First, amid a thriving manufacturing and commercial economy, there are signs that China has been experiencing a spiritual vacuum. This is manifested in the very rapid growth of interest in every form of religion. Christian churches have been thriving, but also Muslims, Buddhists, and Taoists.<sup>35</sup> The early reform leadership adopted a stance of benign indifference but as growth accelerated has adopted more rigorous steps to repress this 'spiritual anesthesia,' yet growth continues.<sup>36</sup> Second, the regime has avoided any further political reform since Tiananmen as too risky and has grown increasingly rigid politically, freezing out feedback and any form of spontaneous mass participation. Many conclude that the only effective way to elicit a government response is through protest activity, which is disruptive and illegal. Without an institutionalized channel for redress, 'informal' participation is likely to continue to grow. The 'stability maintenance' crackdown on the internet, the arts, and dissent is likely to stifle intellectual innovation and scientific research. Economically, despite presenting a neo-liberal economic reform package at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenum of the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee in November 2013, the regime has largely failed to implement it, instead relying principally on state-led growth. The MIC25 industrial policy, the Belt and Road Initiative, the recent deleveraging campaign against shadow banking all disproportionately favor the state-owned sector, crowding out private sector production and shifting China's developmental trajectory from 'reform' as previously understood toward a more centrally planned, state-directed course.<sup>37</sup> Fourth, the campaign to revitalize ideology and enhance China's 'soft power,' despite more than ample budgetary support, has not yet had dramatically successful international results. Even domestically, results have been somewhat uneven. Official statistics for mass protests are no longer published but they apparently continue, and China's

<sup>35</sup>According to Freedom House, there are some 250 million Chinese Buddhists, 8 million Tibetan Buddhists, 80 million Protestants, 12 million Catholics, 23 million Muslims and 20 million Falungong followers. Goh Sui Noi, 'China's Religious Revival and Growing Restrictions', *The Straits Times*, Singapore, December 7, 2018, accessed June 20, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/chinas-religious-revival-and-growing-restrictions>.

<sup>36</sup>Extrapolating from current growth trends, China will have more Christians than any other country in the world by 2030. They may already outnumber CCP members, though estimates vary wildly. Tom Phillips, 'China on course to become "world's most Christian nation" within 15 years', *The Telegraph*, February 14, 2019, accessed June 20, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10776023/China-on-course-to-become-worlds-most-Christian-nation-within-15-years.html>.

<sup>37</sup>Nicholas Lardy's assessment is that direct subsidies to state non-financial firms stood at 543 billion yuan (US\$80 billion) in 2015, one-fifth of their reported profits. Wendy Wu (citing Lardy's 2018 book, *The State Strikes Back*) 'China puts economy at risk by spurning market-oriented reforms it once promoted, long-time observer Nicholas Lardy warns', *South China Morning Post*, February 13, 2019, accessed June 21, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2185905/china-puts-economy-risk-spurning-market-oriented-reforms-it>.

'thousand talents' program designed to entice promising Chinese scholars to return and contribute to the motherland has had only modest success thus far. Continuation of the anti-corruption drive in its present form may also contribute to an atmosphere of intellectual suffocation.

Based on scarcity theory, we would expect China's sixth generation to attempt to compensate for the policy lacunae in the Xi Jinping program while reinforcing and perhaps adjusting its more successful initiatives. Xi's contributions to poverty reduction and environmental protection would be continued and even amplified. Xi's signature anti-corruption campaign for example may bequeath a legacy of higher standards of public morality, while means of implementation may be liberalized to allow for local policy initiative. In the interest of scientific and scholarly innovation, the emphasis on ideological conformity might also be relaxed somewhat to appease China's growing ranks of intellectual and professional elites, not to mention China's surging religious community. Xi's strong tilt in favor of party-state centralization in the economy and society has generated pushback from China's more efficient private and foreign invested enterprise sector, to which the regime has already begun to respond. In the successor generation we might expect to find a more innovative, experimental, spiritually and intellectually open society and an economy that includes a thriving, vigorously competitive private sector that is more open to the international economic and intellectual marketplace.

According to scarcity theory, a compensatory drive for scarce values may hence be expected to arise with the 6<sup>th</sup> generation. But we must not forget socialization theory: the CCP leadership may be expected not only to reflect the needs of the next generation but to try to control and to mold it. For two reasons: first, CCP leaders are typically holdovers from previous generations, and according to life cycle theory will be older and more conservative. Second, in its relatively rigid adherence to ideological principle, reinforced now by special interests engendered by a highly successful growth record, the CCP has over time increasingly resisted the pace of change, especially in the political arena. As Xi Jinping put it in a 2008 speech celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of reform and opening, 'We must resolutely reform what should and can be changed, we must resolutely not reform what should not and cannot be changed.'<sup>38</sup> Since Tiananmen the regime has become wary of losing control, of a second Cultural Revolution, of allowing runaway change to sweep it from power. And no wonder. The CCP is still haunted by the specter of the violent ouster of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and its own close call in 1989. We do not know how long the 5<sup>th</sup> leadership generation will remain in power after the recent elimination of term limits for the presidency and vice presidency, but however long it lasts it may be expected to structure succession arrangements to perpetuate its own value preferences, as previous regimes have done.<sup>39</sup> Thus if the future is logically related to the past, we may look forward to continuing strain between an entrenched regime and an emerging new generation yearning for change.

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<sup>38</sup>Channel News Asia (CNA), 'No one can "dictate" to China what it should do: Xi Jinping', December 18, 2018, accessed June 20, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/china-xi-jinping-no-one-can-dictate-what-it-should-do-11041910>.

<sup>39</sup>The nature of the values Xi Jinping would like to anchor in the PRC future, given his own family background and support base seem to be those of the CCP's 'princeling' aristocracy. Cf. John Garnaut's remarks at an internal Australian government seminar in August 2017, 'Engineers of the Soul: What Australia needs to know about ideology in Xi Jinping's China', as reprinted in *Sinocism*, January 17, 2017, accessed June 20, 2019, <https://nb.sinocism.com/p/engineers-of-the-soul-ideology-in>. The Youth League faction, the strongest elite rival to the 'princelings,' has since 2012 been politically eviscerated. See Wei Shan and Juan Chen, *The Decline of China's Communist Youth League and Its Strive for Survival* (Singapore: East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, 2018).

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