



Fengshu Liu

Modernization as Lived Experiences: Three Generations of Young Men and Women in China

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From the early 1980s onwards, as post-Mao China went through a period of rapid and dramatic social, economic, and cultural transformations, Chinese youth, especially in urban cities, experienced the great impact of these social changes. These changes could be felt in almost every aspect of their lives, from family life to school experience and interpersonal relations. Growing up in an ever-changing society, the Chinese urban youths – also known as the only-child generation – have emerged with a youth culture that breaks away from the long-established tradition in profound ways. This allows them to respond and adapt to the new domestic and global reality of modernization and modernity. What features characterize childhood and youth experiences in the post-Mao era? What social forces shape or reshape the entire new generation in post-Mao China? More importantly, to what extent are contemporary Chinese youths different from, and at the same time similar to, their parents' and grandparents' generations in a range of aspects pertaining to childhood and youth experiences? The last question is very important as the intergenerational comparisons show how experiences in childhood and youth were shaped by, as well as reflective of, the particular social context and nature of Chinese society across three historical timelines. They also disclose the mutual dependence and high interrelation of the three generations, and even more so, continuity in embracing some social and cultural Chinese traditions.

In the book *Modernization as Lived Experiences: Three Generations of Young Men and Women in China*, which draws on 98 life-history interviews in Beijing with both male and female senior-high school students, their parents, and grandparents in 2011–2012 and incorporates the findings from their narrative life stories and commentaries, Fengshu Liu examines some eminent childhood and youth experiences across the three generations on topics including parenting, intergenerational relationship, schooling, gender, and sexuality. Although the book adopts an intergenerational comparative approach to the study of the three generations, it highlights the evolution and changes of the young generation's lives to capture what it means to be young in post-Mao China, from social expectations to subsequent role-taking and the development of personal identity.

The organization of the book follows five themes throughout the chapters. In Chapter 2, the author provides an overview of Western modernization theories, both traditional and contemporary, which serve as the larger theoretical framework for the study. Modernization is, in and of itself, a consequence of the interaction between global trends and local national forces. In China's case, the rapid progression of modernization in the post-Mao era showcases the merging of power between global, rapid and sweeping economic change and technological development, and social, cultural as well as historical factors in China. Sound interpretation and good understanding of social changes in general and the youth's experiences in particular in post-Mao China can only be achieved when viewing them in the context and trends of global modernization. In Chapter 3, the author discusses the «priceless» child in post-Mao urban families. The nature, expectations and experiences of childhood and youth in post-Mao China reveal profound changes from those of parents and grandparents. This is the result of the unprecedented economic and social transformations, the rigid enforcement of the one-child family policy, and the widespread influence of modern parenting and practices. One major change is children's expressive rather than instrumental role in the family. Contemporary children are no longer economically helpful, useful, and supportive to their parents as they were in previous generations. Instead, they have become emotionally precious and valuable when their academic achievement brings psychological comfort and security and a sense of accomplishment to parents, and happiness to family life in general. In Chapter 4, in a context of globalized «schooled society» and through comparison with the older generations' limited educational experiences when they were young, the author gives a detailed account regarding how and why educational accomplishment in post-Mao China has become such a powerful driving force. It not only dominates urban family life and children's everyday experiences, but also serves as the ultimate measure for successful parenting, a child's worthiness, and future prospects for both the child and parents. As the family craves a child's academic excellence at any cost and children experience unprecedented pressure from early childhood onwards, post-Mao China represents a unique schooled society. In Chapters 5 and 6, the author turns her attention from the young generation's overall life experience to the reconstruction of gender identity of young men and women in post-Mao China. In their pure terms of gender qualities or attributes, traditional masculinity and femininity have been perceived differently and have assumed different meanings in the post-Mao generation. Traditional masculine ideals were characterized by positive attributes of manhood, especially in relation to family, such as being a good-natured man, a dutiful husband and a devoted father. However, modern masculinity has become a synonym of outstanding accomplishment, individual aspirations and personal efforts to achieve success in one's career and professional life. For young women, it is the negotiation of the female gender roles in both the social domain and personal life that typically differentiates their feminine ideals from those of the older generations. Traditional gender ideals and the socialist feminine ethos constrained women, to a large extent, to a gendered world which defined females' subordinate status to men and honored the virtue of self-sacrifice and self-denial for the benefit of the family and other social groups. Young women in the post-Mao era, however, enjoy living in two seemingly contradictory worlds. On the one hand, as aspiring individuals they benefit from equal opportunities for educational attainment and individual fulfillment in their academic and professional lives (mainly due to the one-child family policy). On the other, they value an enjoyable private life and depend on family for personal happiness, driven by the female self. In Chapter 7, the author illustrates gender reconstruction through changes in romantic relationships, sexuality and marriage across the three generations. While older generations' courtship was

characterized by pragmatic love and rationality in terms of means and ends, the young generation values romance in their relationships, capturing and expressing an emotional feeling of love towards their partner. Unlike their parents and grandparents, who were closed-minded in sexuality during courtship and perceived even talking about sex as a taboo subject, the young people are open to a sexual relationship with their romantic partner, and frank and knowledgeable about sexuality and reproduction. For the older generations, marriage is the natural and ultimate result of courtship and love, and sexuality can only be granted in marriage. For the young generation, however, romantic relationships and pre-marital sex are merely expressions of sexual attraction or emotional attachment at best, but do not necessarily lead to marriage.

As a showcase of how forces of global modernization have interacted with local social factors in post-Mao China to rapidly transform China into a modernized nation, the book offers insights into both the process and characteristics of China's modernization. Through the lens of rich individual life histories – especially regarding childhood and youth experiences across three generations in modern China – the book sheds light on various stages of China's historical and social transition towards its modernization. The moderate change between the two older generations, but the dramatic change between the older generations and the young generation, indicates that China's century-long progression towards modernization does not present a linear pathway, as modernization theorists would assume. Social progress was slowed down or even hindered during earlier times when long-established Chinese tradition and socialist ideology and practices dominated people's lives. China's modernization has eventually emerged as China's open-door policy in the post-Mao era allowed access to global modernity and China established itself as a member of the global community.

As depicted in the divergence thesis in modernization theory, China's modernization represents a unique model that highlights a strong interrelationship between modernity and tradition, as well as continuity in embracing some social and cultural traditions in the achievement of modernization. For example, the surging aspiration for academic achievement in post-Mao China has not only been intensified by the market economy, the high demand for an educated and skilled labor force, and the fierce competition for a desirable and secure job, but has also been enhanced by long-embraced Chinese tradition of reverence for education as an exemplary norm. Influenced by Confucian tradition, academic achievement has had a central role in Chinese culture for many centuries. Self-improvement, self-cultivation, and self-confidence about one's capabilities are all built around academic achievement. Unlike Western countries, where learning is often viewed as a task to complete, the Chinese highly respect learning and consider the acquisition of it as a virtue. In addition, Chinese parents' high expectations, overwhelming investment and deep involvement in children's academic work also reflect the Confucian ideal that «he who excels in study can follow an official career» (*xue er you ze shi*) and the crucial role of group effort in terms of support and assistance from parents in a child's academic success.

With the increasing awareness of and interest in modernization and modernity, especially in a non-Western society like China, this book represents a masterpiece of sociological study from a historical perspective. It offers insights into the process and characteristics of China's modernization through culturally and contextually intimate accounts of childhood and youth experiences across three generations of Chinese families. The book is interesting and enjoyable reading while also being intellectually stimulating and appealing. It would be an excellent reader for anyone who is interested in modern Chinese society, human history, social changes, global modernization, and international studies.