

## Chinese Youth: A New Generation for New Challenges?

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**Chinese Youth: A New Generation for New Challenges?** Karl Mannheim's theory considers that the changes in the context of socialization of the new cohorts and the change of lifestyle are the key components of the formation of the "socio-historical generation". Going along with this statement, this paper regards the most important challenges that Chinese youth is facing as the matrix of the formation of a new generation which emerged when the Great Opening and the Four Reforms decided by Deng Xiaoping became effective for a large part of population. It took 15 years to implement and put into motion this radical change in economy, society and culture. And it is only in 1995 – 2000 that the making of a new generation became concrete. Four key challenges can be identified that characterize this new generation by its difference: an aging society and a deficit of young women, a system of formation that goes faster than the economy and the labor market, youth unemployment and the compulsory modernization of the whole system of production and the transformation of sexual behaviors, family life that indicate a deep and steady transformation of norms and values in private life.

**Key words:** Generation, Youth, Aging Society, Gender, Education, Employment Sexuality

**Čínska mládež. Nová generácia pre nové výzvy?** Teória Karla Mannheimu predpokladá, že zmeny v kontexte socializácie nových vekových skupín a zmeny životného štýlu predstavujú kľúčové komponenty utvárania "socio-historickej generácie". V súlade s týmto stanoviskom štúdia zvažuje najdôležitejšie výzvy, ktorým čelí čínska mládež pri formovaní ako novej generácie, ktorá sa vynára v čase, kedy sa začali na veľkej časti obyvateľstva prejavovať štyri reformy a "Veľké Otvorenie" od Denga Xiaopinga. Trvalo 15 rokov, kým začala fungovať radikálna zmena v ekonomike, spoločnosti a kultúre. V období rokov 1995 – 2000 sa utváranie novej generácie stalo hmatateľným. Existujú štyri kľúčové výzvy alebo faktory, ktoré charakterizujú odlišnosť "novej generácie": starnúca populácia a nedostatok mladých žien; systém formovania je mohutnejší ako ekonomika a pracovný trh; nezamestnanosť mladých, vynútená modernizácia celého systému reprodukcie a transformácia sexuálneho správania sa, ako aj rodinného života, ktorý stále prejavuje hlbokú a pevnú transformáciu noriem a hodnôt v súkromnom živote.

**Kľúčové slová:** generácia, mladosť, starnúca populácia, pohlavie, vzdelanie, zamestnanosť a sexualita

### Introduction

The objective of this article is not only to describe the Chinese youth but also to underline some of the transformations that occurred over the last decades amongst the new cohorts.

By doing so, this article aims to take some distance with a "parti pris" of empiricism that would lead us to catalog the Chinese youth category after category, describing young people from the viewpoint of the family, education, employment and unemployment, marginalization and delinquency, without forgetting youth culture, leisure time or values.

### *1/ The issue of Generation as a key question*

The situation of young people in China has changed dramatically over the last decades but one of the key research questions that have been imposed on the researcher has remained the same: the issue of generation.

Even before the 'Tiananmen events' in 1989, this issue was already a research priority for the government. However, at that time the focus was more on the cohabitation of four distinctive generations: the generation of the Long March, the generation of the Great Leap, the Cultural Revolution generation and the coming generation called to promote a more open society, a society of consumption, leisure, with an emerging individualism. Even though the strong Confucian principle of age hierarchy and obedience to the elders (文) facilitate generational relationships, the gap between these four generations was somehow regarded as a challenge for social cohesion and a threat for the perpetuation of what has recently been called during the 17<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CCP a 'harmonious society' (2007).

History has forged 4 distinctive generations. From a sociological perspective, one question has to be raised: how can these four generations live together? How can they cooperate to put Chinese society on the track of modernity and development? What has been transmitted from one generation to another?

Three factors may be evoked that lead us to think that the experience and the culture of the elders have had little impact on the "identity formation" and cultural content of the new generation.

In first place, it should be reminded that during the "Cultural Revolution", nearly 17 millions of educated young people were sent to the countryside. Between 1968 to the mid 1970s, half of one generation was directly concerned. Furthermore, after the dismantlement of the "Red Guards", 20 millions of young people were sent to reeducation camps (Cabestan, 1994).

Thus, it is well known in the field of generation studies that the cohorts of individuals which experienced dramatic events, such as 'concentration camps', wars (especially when they end up in defeat), or revolutions do not speak or speak very little and very late. It is as if certain generations have to construct themselves as a generational unit after a trauma, a foundational event that knits together the individuals around a common identity and that needs to cool off and be alleviated. Some personal stories cannot be told (Lagrée, 1990).

It seems that the situation in China today does not derogate from this rule. In China, the condemnation of the 'Gang of Four' (October 1976) and the acknowledgment of the Chairman Mao's 'mistakes' have not only put a definitive end to the Cultural Revolution but have also locked up those who were the

actors by a wall of silence<sup>1</sup>. This turns this “Cultural Revolution” generation into a “silent generation”. For different reasons, political for the former, psychological for the latter, tormentors and victims are confined in this silence.

At the turn of the 1980s, thanks to Deng Xiaoping’s impulse, a new context of living and of socialization came into being. With China’s entry into modernity, new jobs are needed and new career prospects take shape that definitively digs a gap between parents and offspring. Furthermore, conditions are brought about to draw a yellow line between “before and after”: before 1980 and after the discourses on the Four Reforms. Not only is the political and ideological environment submitted to a radical process of transformation, but also attitudes, behaviors, values, culture and interests are about to be radically changed. As it has been argued by Yunxiang Yan, 30 years of collectivism have untied the knots of community solidarity and prepared the cradle of individualism (Yan, 2003). The 1980s and 1990s have created a new context which facilitated the rise of a Chinese individualism.

However, in that analysis the impact of economic differences or, more accurately, of economic inequalities cannot be neglected.

China has moved from a situation of hardship and poverty to a point where the economy as whole is about to overtake US, Germany, Japan. It is fair to say, however, that so far, this booming development profits the urban cities of China and urban citizens, while even though it is creating a steady improvement in life conditions, the countryside remains far away from the process of modernization.

From 1980, the coming generation has received the “entelechies” of the modernity of the new China. It should be noted that if this process of change has affected all Chinese young people, wherever they are located, it concerns in the first place the urban youth, especially those living in coastal cities.

Young farmers and young migrant workers, called “*Mingong*”, as well as the young people living in the countryside, all these people are actors in this ongoing process of social change. However, advancement of new behaviors, new values and new cultural patterns is more spectacular and emerges faster amongst those who live in urban areas, those who are part of the 230 million population who belong to the emerging middle class (CASS, 2011).

In this respect, the class gap dimension cross-cuts and interferes with the generation gap dimension that has been mentioned previously. Going along this line, it should be added that amongst the basic structuring social power, relati-

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<sup>1</sup> Sixth Plenary session of the Eleven Central committee adopted a resolution on the subject, entitled “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China”. (1979) 17<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist party of China. China Daily, July 6, 2011.

ons that sustain the process of change, gender and ethnic relations also have to be regarded as key factors that have to be taken into account in the analysis in the same time and with the same salience than class relations (Jenny, 1983).

Taking into account that last remark we are therefore sent back to the thinking of Karl Mannheim, who proposes a model that deals with the subtle dialectic of unity and diversity. A social and historical generation is a social construct resulting from the exposure of a given group or category contemporaneous to a specific event that can be regarded as the symbol of a change of context of life and, above all, transformation of the context of socialization. Time is for little in this process. Age and date of birth are secondary elements. The key factor is the introduction of a given difference into the historical continuity.

### **Is there in China a new generation in the making?**

In the previous paragraphs, two features have been mentioned that both can be referred to as an hallmark, a signal, the symbol of an historical turning point: that is the condemnation of ‘Gang of Four’ and the Dian Xiaoping discourses in 1979 – 1982, which could be called the disavowal of the Cultural Revolution generation. This has an impact on the Great Opening and the motto ‘get rich’, the recent economic boom of China, the emergence of middle classes in search of wealth, consumption, and leisure, and the insertion of Chinese society in the global world.

In that sense, the Dian Xiaoping discourses can be regarded as a ‘marker of generation’ even though the consequences of this political change of course will become significant and obvious only 10 or 15 years later.

How does this change appear in the mind of the new generation, the youth of today? That is the issue that now should be addressed.

### ***2/ Shrinking Youth, Aging Society***

For a start, it seems absolutely necessary to look into the demographic situation which sheds light on the social and cultural context that young people are facing. Before this, however, one preliminary remark has to be made. Demographic studies have taught us that demographic trends evolve under the influence of factors that are following the course of the history of a society. Wars, hardship, starvation, disasters, or on the opposite side economic booms, medical progress, birth control for example are such events that have little to do with politics or are indirectly connected to politics. As it is well known, on the contrary, the current demographic situation of China is the result of a political decision taken at the end of the 1970s in order to control the fast growth of the Chinese population (Sun, Zhao, 2007). After nearly 30 years of implementation

of the One-Child Family Policy, the total number of single kids has reached 0.126 billion by 2005 counting for 33 % of the 0-25 years old people. But the number is much higher in urban than in rural areas. After more than three decades, that policy has been undoubtedly a success with regards to the goal of limiting population growth. This appears clearly in comparison with India that has left the population increase practically uncontrolled. However, that policy has at least three consequences that already have a dramatic impact on the young people situation:

With the birth limitation, China experiences a dramatic aging process. Everybody knows that this situation is a delayed-action bomb whose consequences can already be forecast: the increase of the load on the young cohorts' shoulders, postponement of the retirement age, problems of retirement pension, and also, as it is also well known, a decrease of economic, social and cultural dynamism.

*'The number of young people in the country shrank by 13 % between 2000 and 2005 as a result of the national family planning policy, though researchers said trend would slow in the coming years.*

*A recent study of the share of the population aged 14 to 29 showed that there were 294 million people in that age group at the end of 2005, down from 338 million in 2000.*

*It also showed that there were 429.7 million people aged 14 to 35 at the end of 2005, down about 12.5 percent from the 491 million in 2000. The share of the population aged from 9 to 13 who grew up to be youths in 2005 was much smaller than the cohorts of 25 to 29 years old and 31 to 35 years old.*

*The share of the total population occupied by people aged 14 to 20 dropped to 22.9 percent in 2005 from 27.2 in 2000. The share occupied by 14 – 35 year olds tumbled from 39.5 percent to 33.5 percent (Chen, 2007).*

However, all these pessimistic views are for the future, even if it is a near future in terms of generation perspectives. For the current time however, this One-Child Policy has important and significant consequences for society today that are also related by the media as well as by researchers.

First of all, as Inglehart and Abramson have shown in their life-long work, the strength of one generation to bring about changes, its ability to promote innovation is partially dependent on its volume in a given society. Despite becoming a 'pivotal generation' with an increasing responsibility to support a growing elder population, the contemporary youth is likely to receive less and less attention from the society due to the relative diminution of its volume. This represents a challenge for the future, rather than for the present (Lagrée 2006).

However, cultural factors are clashing with the politically driven One-Child Policy. Following a 'natural demographic regime of development,' the number of boys should equal to the number of girls, with a slight superiority of the

latter. Since the mortality rate is extremely low up to an advanced age, the number of men and women at the age of sexual relationships, marriage and more generally at the age of the entrance in adulthood should be balanced. Such is not the case in China. According to experts, 100.000.000 women are missing. The abortion of baby girls after the detection by a medical scan of the gender of the embryo, or even – as it is reported – the suppression of the baby girl after the birth are so frequent that they create a huge deficit in the men/women ratio. As a result:

*According to China's latest census, 166.9 Chinese boys were born for every 100 girls in 2000 – up from an already alarming "sex ratio at birth" of 111.3 boys in 1990. Both figures are well above the 105-107 boys for every 100 girls considered as normal worldwide. In the USA, there were 104.8 boys born in 2000 for every 100 girls.*

*As a result, China will have 29 million to 33 million unmarried males ages 15-34 by 2020, according to a report by Hudson and Andrea Den Boer of Britain's university of Ken in a (forthcoming) issue of the journal International Security. Other estimates put the 2020 figure at 40 million unmarried men known in Chinese as **gang guang**. That is more than the current female populations of Taiwan and South Korea combined (Wiseman, 2002).*

Right now, young men face more and more difficulties to find a spouse. A journalist who asked a young man what sort of young woman he would like to marry received a straightforward answer: *'the problem is not what kind of lady I would prefer but if I could find one'*.

It is not the task or the role of sociologist to make predictions on any subject related to the ongoing transformations of the society. Those who took the risk of forecasting on the medium term encountered severe refutation by reality itself. However, a sufficient amount of knowledge has been accumulated so far in various contexts and at various periods of time to enable us to have some opinion on the issue. Edgar Morin, for instance, was doing research in a province of France at the turn of the 1960s, a period in France that represented a rural exodus, a phenomenon analogous to the Chinese domestic or internal migration. He argued that modernity in these remote areas was introduced first by women. A similar argument has been put forward by Taiwanese anthropologists to explain the fact that more and more Taiwanese ladies in all parts of society are reluctant to marry Taiwanese men who are in their opinion too traditionalist and, culturally speaking, conservative.

To the extent that such argument is founded, it is not unreasonable that Chinese women from the countryside would be more likely to take their chances in urban and modern areas. Such a behavior would reduce the gender deficit of women in these Chinese cities, but on the other hand it would accentuate the problems in the countryside at the present time.

The evolution of the French rural areas from the 1960s onwards gives credence to such a scenario. It is not without reason that a famous sociologist Henry Mendras entitled his book on the subject *'The French Desert'* (Mendras, 1965).

Observation and analysis of the demographic pyramid and trends draw the attention to a global threat already inscribed in the figures: the aging process of Chinese society. They also turn the attention on a likely reinforcement of the gap between rural and urban areas as far as the gender balance is concerned. Different segments of the new cohort would not be evenly exposed to the same difficulties.

### ***3/ Better educated cohorts? What for?***

With regards to the generation building up process, the issue of education is decisive. That was the key point in France during the 1960s with the passage from an elite education system to what has latter been called a "Mass education system". It seems that a similar process occurred in China at the time of the Great Opening, when it was decided to re-open the universities and to encourage the families to send their children to school, college, and university in order to get as much access to education as possible. In this respect tremendous improvements have been made in the 1980s and 1990s, which in terms of generational perspective look like an educational revolution. It has been argued earlier that 'generation formation' is brought about by the 'differences' that emerge in a context of socialization. From this viewpoint, the development of mass education in China is without any contest a dramatic factor of formation of a new generation. However, in 2004 only 19 % of members of one given cohort reached the university and enrolled in college, which represents 20 million college students (Liu, 2006). For information, the target fixed by the French ministry of education under François Mitterrand in 1981 was 80 %. Today recent records show that 71.6 % of one cohort reaches the university level<sup>2</sup>.

Even though China has made a huge effort to enhance education and higher education, the gap between China and western countries remains considerable. Only one out of five youngsters is reaching university today. This gives an indication of the huge gap that is about to be created between those in and those out, between those who benefit from higher education and those who are deprived of such assets.

Not everything is over with the possession or the non-possession of a diploma. Besides the value of education per se, education exists in order to pre-

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<sup>2</sup> "71.6 % d'une classe d'age titulaire d'un baccalaureat. 2011 Année record." *Le Monde*. 13 Juillet 2011, p. 14.

pare individuals for the job market. And successful career and satisfactory social position can be gained on the labor market without having entered university. On the opposite side, in the present context some majors turn out to be of low efficiency as far as the entry into the labor market is concerned. However, it should be underlined that the remarkable success of China has been achieved by an economy with low costs, using low or medium ranged skills, competences and qualifications. An economy essentially turned towards the production of goods. China is winning against the world competition because this country is 'the workshop of the world'. This is, however, a temporary victory that calls for significant changes. Economic improvement nourishes an increasing demand for the emerging middle class in search of an increased consumption. This phenomenon could fuel claims for an income rises, lowering today's comparative advantage that China still detains over competing economies. On the other hand, salaries of the low-skill labor force are kept at an extremely low level thanks to the pressure excited by the flux of 'rural' migrants trying to find a job in the big cities of China. In Shanghai for instance, the minimum wage has been fixed to 1.120 RMB per month (\$170) in 2010. Things are changing though, and recently a new generation of urban migrants has emerged that not only demands consideration and respect but also higher salaries and access to welfare provisions<sup>3</sup>. The opportunities for cheap labor and unskilled workers are fading. In order to afford rising incomes, there needs to be an increase of productivity that requires in China a transition towards a knowledge economy, implying a much higher level of education of the workforce.

The trend but also the challenge in this matter is a move towards more education and a turn from an economy based on the production of goods, i.e. the 'workshop' towards a knowledge economy.

This is precisely the orientation taken by the universities and the higher education system. For instance, Yao Li (Li and al. 2008) writes:

*"Higher education in China has involved major new resource commitments to tertiary education and significant changes in organizational form, reflecting China's commitment to continued high growth through quality upgrading and the production of ideas and intellectual property as set out in both the 10th (2001 – 2005) and 11th (2006 – 2010) 5-year plans. The number of undergraduate and graduate students in China has been growing at approximately 30 % per year since 1999, and the number of graduates at all levels of higher education in China has approximately quadrupled in the last six years. Entering*

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/29/us-china-migrants-idUSTRE75S0PU20110629>

*class sizes and total student enrolments have risen even faster, approximately quintupling.*

*...The number of graduate and undergraduate students in China has approximately quadrupled in the last six years. Before 1999, the number of students both graduating and enrolling was stable. In 1998, the total number of graduates from tertiary education was 0.8 million; in 2005, it was more than 3 million, a nearly threefold increase. The number of enrolments (of new and total students) has risen even faster and approximately quintupled between 1998 and 2005.*

*It is widely recognized that there will be substantially more Ph.D. engineers and scientists in China in 2010 than in the United States, as China produces three times the number of engineers per year...*"

A tremendous effort has been made to meet the needs of the country in terms of education in order to maximize the capability of China to modernize.

In terms of education policy and educational system, however, China is still far away from being able to satisfy the demand. As a result, just like in many other Asian countries, competition is very hard and starts at the earliest age. Consequences for young people and their families are direct. First of all, this produces stress and leads to a lack of leisure time. Reports of various origins converge to signal out this point. For instance, a study report published by CYCRC in 2007 indicates that less than 20 % of the students of primary schools in Beijing take part in summer camps or in extra-school activities. 70 % of the Beijing students study at home after the school time when the rate rises to 43 % in Tokyo and 34 % in Seoul. Only 20 % of the Beijing children can watch TV or play with their mates (CYCRC, 2007). Not surprisingly, outcomes of such situations are disastrous. Three words can summarize the effects at the individual level: stress, dropping-out, and suicide (Tse, 2002). From one year to another, 10 % of the school children give up upon their education.

At a more structural level, it should be underlined that besides the tremendous effort made by China, the system of education and higher education is suffering from a lack of financial resources and a lack of infrastructure or, to put it otherwise, it is facing a relative limitation from the state in terms of investment in human capital. Thus, less than 3 % of the total GDP is devoted to education, when the government's target remains at 4 %. Let us quote Fang Yi and CYCRC official on this issue: "*We are unable to find excuses for not properly funding education nowadays considering the rise of China's GDP and increased tax revenues.*"

This critical remark applies particularly to the universities. Right at the beginning of the Great Opening, China has been meeting a tension between mass education development and the formation of the elite of the nation. Within the Party itself, debates were raised that are still present today. One of the argu-

ments is that the choice of putting the emphasis on higher education has directly and simply reduced the chances of equalizing the opportunities of having access to education for the various segments of the population, especially with regards to the goal of reducing the gap between the countryside and urban areas.

However, over the last three decades, China has pursued the effort of developing the higher education system. Although the commitment of the state towards this goal has never faltered, it turned out to be insufficient with regards to the assigned objectives of the government. Because of this, the students' and families' contribution was called to dramatically increase.

*Tuitions to China's universities which range from 5000 yuan to 10,000 yuan (1,200 US dollars) a year are about 25 times higher than they were in 1989, according to the China Youth and Children Center (CYCRC)'.*

As a direct consequence, the gap between rich and poor is increasing, with an emerging middle class in between striving to see their offspring getting into this formidable fast track elevator that higher education represents.

Pierre Bourdieu, Jean Claude Passeron, Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, each of them through their own perspectives has shown that the education system lies at the heart of reproduction process of social class organization. This is also the case in modern China, with the particularity that university has come to legitimize the position acquired by the people who were supposed to come from a classless society. The school system does not only legitimize the reproduction of class position, its function is also to legitimize class formation. Surely in this process the "gift and merit ideology" is at the forefront.

However, it is widely believed that the diploma acquired at university is the guarantee of a social position, social status and an acceptable salary. However, over the last decade it became clear that this dream is far from reality. Higher education produces each year 6 million fresh graduates. One year after leaving university, 1.6 million are still jobless. In addition to this, statistics do not provide figures concerning those who are forced to accept under-qualified and underpaid job. Nevertheless, it is now well known that new graduates frequently earn less than family "maids" ("ayi") or the migrant workers recruited on the "black market". The gap can range from salaries of 1500 RMB per month for recent graduates to 2000 even 3000 RMB a month for this non-educated workforce.

The dream breaks upon this awakening. Disappointment and disenchantment are consequences of this phenomenon. Prospective students ask themselves whether it is worth going through a severe and extremely long competition, to pay high tuition fees if their expectations of a better life, of improvement or even of promotion will not be fulfilled. From my personal observations, two examples can be given to illustrate a feeling that is widespread.

ad amongst young students who have to fight very hard for their future. A Major in Social Work is one of them. Students are more than happy when they succeed in the entrance exam for university. They are no longer high school students but university students. This success obviously gives them a better status in the eyes of their parents, family, kinship, and community life. When the university is located in Beijing, the status and the rewards are even better. This success leads them to neglect their choice of major. Studying social work in Beijing represents such an achievement that they tend to forget more competitive fields such as finance, management or sociology. It is only a few years later, when graduation approaches, that their eyes open and the student becomes aware that the path that he/she has followed is a dead-end, a path that brings them back to the small towns of the countryside from where they came.

The second example is more structural. It refers simultaneously to strategies of actors encompassed in generations and a job market propelled into globalization. This example describes the professions of lawyers, i.e. students in Law Studies. In China, it takes 4 years to graduate from Law Studies. At that point, students can pass an exam, which allows them to become certified and be recognized as lawyers. They can register and become solicitors, barristers or exert all the professions attached to their competences. This major was very popular due to the novelty of the profession and the scarcity of the professional lawyers allowed new graduates to easily find a job. Over the years the situation has experienced a U-turn. At the same time, this major became very popular because of the advantages and work conditions that were experienced by the previous generation. On the other side, even though China is currently experiencing great progress in terms of the implementation of the law and the resort to justice and tribunals, the positions available to lawyers, barristers and others do not increase at the same rhythm and high powered positions in law firms are all full. The new generation is facing a situation of blockage due to a demand that does not equal the offer. Furthermore, the law system is put under close examination by the other modern countries of the globe. In the US, for instance, there is no law study at the undergraduate level. Candidates have to possess a BA to engage in order to take a Master Degree in law. In France, Law Studies usually last 7-8 years. The surplus of candidates to the professions of lawyers on one hand and the weakness of their education in the eyes of the international community on the other signifies that the education system needs to be revised. As for the students who enter the lawyers job market, the first feeling is disenchantment, because they either find a job that is under their expectations or they find no job at all.

*'The idea that the education is useless was once rampant among Chinese youth during the early years of the country's economic reform and openness. Many young people at that time dismissed the importance of going to school, when*

*seeing people without much education who become rich by selling clothes or fruits on their own. But in recent decades education has been a hot pursuit as diplomas have been valued higher by employers, be it government agencies or large companies.*

*Now that more and more young adults receive college diplomas at ever increasing costs, while the job market gets tougher once again, some young people apparently start to question the worthiness of getting good education (Liu, 2006).*

Despite this, it is worth noticing that even though more and more students are aware of the situation, only a few of them are planning to pursue their studies up to a MA or beyond. In a Confucian society, higher education is easily regarded as a royal channel for social promotion. Thus, entering university is already a great achievement. The objective is then to graduate. However, considering the tightness of the labor market and the deskilling they according to their own personal criteria undergo when entering the job market, most of them do not plan to pursue their studies further. That sort of individual actor strategy corresponds to an outdated period. It was a strategy that fit the time immediately following the Great Opening and the implementation of the Four Reforms proposed by Dian Xiaoping, when Chinese society met a critical shortage of high skilled or medium high skilled labor force. This was just after the time when Dian Xiaoping could write a note to Mao Zedong reporting that the university graduates were ‘not even capable of reading a book in their own field when they left the university’, and this was after 1975. That situation of poor knowledge level, skill and competences for those who were destined to occupy senior positions lasted several years, offering great opportunities to the flux of new graduates at the BA level entering the job market. But the aggregation of individual decisions that go in the same direction has little by little led to phenomenon of saturation. These places are already occupied, leading to a lowering of the diploma value on the labor market and forcing individuals to obtain an MA or a higher degree, a phenomenon that today more and more students are inclined to do.

To be short with regards to education, the new Chinese cohorts are facing two trends: one that exposes the risk of a deeper and wider fragmentation of society, an exacerbation of the distance between the social classes, the eventual exclusion of the poorest who have little chance of re-joining the mainstream society. Overlapping all of this is a deep and widening gap between the countryside and urban areas. On the other hand, the real and considerable push towards modernization or – should it be allowed to say – towards a situation of Asian post-modernity brings about the formidable opening of the window on an economic knowledge society, calling for uppermost education including uppermost higher education, a transition from the production of goods to the

production of signs, symbols and knowledge, and as a result the widening of the high-skilled job offer.

Young people exiting from the school system are confronted to a general situation of improvement and betterment. At the same time, however, they are meeting two opposite trends: a downward push and an upward pull. At the present time when the school system in China is genuinely an instrument of modernization it is also, with regards to the reality of the labor market, a threat for social cohesion.

#### ***4/ Youth Employment***

The presentation of the challenges that can transform a cohort of young people into a socio-historical “generation” requires precise information about the characteristics of the employment opportunities available and the employment situation as a whole.

In this domain, few statistics will be enough to shed light on the situation. However, it should be brought to mind that the categories of the analysis are misleading. In 1994 and then in 2008, the government enforced labor contract laws to force enterprises and employees to sign a written job contract. Despite this, the process was still at its early beginning in 2007 – 2008<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, in the absence of the formal job contract, the category of employment/unemployment is losing a great part of its significance. In the same way, the report from CYCRC (An, 2007) indicates that more and more young people are moving in and out of the sphere of activity in order to get more education, taking advantage of the various plans and programs of formation that have been set up by the government.

Four features strongly characterize the situation of young people on the labor market.

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<sup>4</sup> China new Labor Law. Chris White reports on your rights at work in China: November 2007 ws: employment contract reforms.

<http://chinaherald.net/ChinaLabourLawsnov07.doc>

*“Pr Liu Cheng: ‘Much past practice in four in five private enterprises in China have not even signed job contracts with their workers. The lack of contracts leaves workers in a legal limbo. This meant work rights were not enforced and there was no access to the pension fund as there was no proof of an employment contract and the employer denied liability. So now the employment contracts must be in writing and failure to do so means the employer faces liability for double wages. The new law says there is a written contract and provides minimums.’ “*

– According to the On Line Encyclopedia Wikipedia, 40 % of the employees of public sector would not have signed a job contract.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labor\\_Contract\\_Law\\_of\\_the\\_People's\\_Republic\\_of\\_China](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labor_Contract_Law_of_the_People's_Republic_of_China)

a) The labor force is not homogeneous. It is made up of several segments of which the most important can be categorized by an opposition: young people/adults, men/ women, national/international migrants. Each of these segments has various degrees of employability, (Chang, 2008) and each of them has a probability of being recruited or laid off, according to the societal choices made by country. For instance, it can be argued that in the 1980s the UK made the societal choice to lay off male adults whose incomes were much higher than those of women. At the same period, in France, the societal choice has been made to the detriment of young people. Men were regarded by each component of the society as the household breadwinners and for this reason, their jobs had to be preserved. Women were considered as being a part of the secondary market and therefore more likely to be made redundant or to get temporary jobs (Doeringer & Piore, 1971). As for the young people, they were in the first line of the process of transformation/deregulation of the labor market. The over-exposition of young people to unemployment, disqualification and precariousness remains one of the characteristics of that category of the labor force. According to the recent research, that cannot be imputed to the age factor but to the fact that they are entering the labor market as beginners, having no work experience and that they have to make their proofs on the labor market (Commissariat General du Plan, 2001).

*'Data showed that since 2001, youth under 35 years have been the main proportion of the unemployed, accounting for 70 % of the total number of the unemployed. Meanwhile, 10 million newly added workers in urban areas are all youth. Therefore, 20 and 30 year olds have replaced 40 and 50 year olds as the main body of a large number of unemployed workers' (An, 2007).*

In China, cohorts born during or after the "Cultural Revolution" have had enough time to secure their position on the urban labor market, which has been and obviously still is extremely prosperous. Therefore, little room has been left to new entrants whose flux is restlessly increasing due to the permanent rural exodus (Andreas, 2009). This could eventually turn into a 'generation' conflict between those who occupy the places on the labor market and the applicants for a job, i.e. those who would like to get in.

b) The second characteristic is an opposition or, more precisely, a structural paradox between a severe shortage of skilled labor force and the fact that college students increasingly meet more and more difficulties to find a job, especially a job that fits into their competences.

*In recent years, the problem of college students' employment has grown more prominent and become a new characteristic of over-supply of labor force. Data from the Ministry of Education showed that only 70 % of 1.45 million college graduates were employed in 2002, and there were approximately 430.000 individuals who could not find a job. In 2003, the number of college graduates*

reached 2.12 million and 520.000 among them were waiting for employment opportunities. The number of college graduates waiting for employment in 2004 has increased to 690,000 and will increase to 790,000 again in 2005. College graduates would inevitably enter the group of unemployed youth immediately if they are unable to find a job upon graduation. It has become a prominent social issue when college graduates have difficulty to find jobs, which makes current employment problems more complicated (An, 2007).

This paradox of a shortage of high-skilled workers and unemployment of college students goes along with a situation of “blockage” of the generation relationships. Due to a great demand, the elders entered the high-skilled labor market when competition and selection were at their lowest level. The newcomers who arrive now, maybe with a better qualification, are facing a situation where most of the positions are occupied for still several years, up to the moment where the holders of these positions will be replaced due to the coming of age.

c) The third characteristic is the lack of socialization of the labor market: a certain lack of preparation, a lack of knowledge about what the market is, which results in an inappropriate behavior. The same features were observed in Russia after the fall of the Soviet regime. In this country where access to job was not only a right but also a duty, some local authorities, such as Novosibirsk, developed training programs to train young people to the rules and the inner works of this ‘free’ and fiercely competitive market. In China today, two markets coexist. One is state regulated and competition is under severe control by the administration, the second is still uncontrolled and governed by the competition. Youngsters have to choose between the two. The first one is secure but poorly paid, the second could be rewarding and could open to a bright future but it is also risky and requires a permanent energy and mobilization to face a restless competition. During my stay in a campus in Beijing, I had the opportunity to observe the decision-making of a young person employed in the international office of the university, who decided to move to the private sector. Without preparation and without knowledge of the situation in private companies, he was obliged to quit the job he had found to go back to the previous position. Some more clever individuals manage to put one foot in each market simultaneously, an attempt to enter progressively into the free market, while keeping some security during this period of transition from one market to another. Despite this pessimism, disappointment and disenchantment are quite often the feelings of those who experience for a while the hardship of the free economy.

d) The fourth characteristic of this youth labor market is its fluidity. ‘*Youth freely changed jobs in the country’s current social transitional period*’ (Xinhua, 2007).

To some extent, one can dare to compare this situation with that of France at the beginning of the economic crisis in the late 1970s – early 1980s, when taking advantage of the shrinking youth labor market, employers introduced several measures to make the labor market more flexible, making the job search easier (Pialoux, 1979). Scholars studying working-class culture would have easily been able to demonstrate that moving from one job to another, from one city to another were part of the strategies of the resistance of the labor force without status and in a precarious situation. Therefore, the comparison with the current situation in China for young people can be easily made. However, one meaningful difference has to be signaled out: France at the time of the research was in a transition towards a regime of job shortage, whereas China, whatever the difficulties met by the economy, is booming and the transition that the society is experiencing is likely to drive the country towards improvement. France during 1975 – 1980 was submitted – and is still submitted – to a process of deregulation and of *flexibilization* of the labor force that supports the major part of the weight of the cohorts arriving onto the labor market. In China, the market is already deregulated, or more precisely the part of the economy which is market-driven has only a minimum set of regulations and it is today one of the challenges of the government to set up and to implement some sort of state regulation. On the other hand, young people are ‘forced’ to become flexible and to improve their assets in order to surf on the waves of an impetuous job market.

With regards to the key topic of this paper, this last observation leads to the question about the role of the market and more precisely of this weakly controlled and very flexible market as one of the dimensions of the fabric of a new ‘generation’. Again, even though the whole country is taken in turmoil of fast and deep modernization, it is clear as crystal that people living in the urban areas are in the front line of the process.

##### ***5/ Change in family structure and sexual behaviors***

Why devote so few pages to the dramatic issue of sexual behaviors, romance and intimate relations amongst the Chinese youth? The answer lies in the fact that sexual behavior is without any doubt a very strong and meaningful indicator of the process of social change in the most intimate parts of daily life. However, from the viewpoint of sociology, these personal and intimate transformations have more consequences. Indeed, this impacts on family structure, the institution of marriage, couple formation, gender relations between the members of a couple but also on the generation relations between parents and children, announcing the transformation of kinship and the shift in sociability activity (Yan, 2003).

From a sociological viewpoint, since Talcott Parsons (1942) at least, sexuality has been associated with social reproduction and continuity of the social order. However, in the context of Chinese society today, change in sexual behaviors of the young people is frequently associated with the coming of modernity and is frequently evoked as a 'revolution' of the mores, norms and values (Ho, 1997).

From the available surveys and scientific analyses, it is not clear whether or not a genuine revolution occurred or is occurring in this domain. It may seem as if we are witnessing a process that intermingles both continuity and change. Because of the particularity of the Chinese context, changes in this domain have dramatic effects. As it has been argued by Dr. Fang-fu Ruan (1992), a conception of sexual relations that borrows a lot from Confucian teachings and the Confucian tradition is predominant<sup>5</sup>. Borrowing from this article, a portrayal can be sketched by a few defining features:

*China was a matriarchal society and Confucius and Mencius defined the superior-inferior relationship between men and women as heaven-ordained more than 2000 years ago. In traditional Chinese society, women should observe the Three Obediences and Four Virtues. Women were to be obedient to the father and elder brothers when young, to the husband when married and to the sons when widowed. Thus the Chinese women were controlled and dominated by men from cradle to grave. The ideal of feminine behavior created a dependent being, at once inferior, passive and obedient (Ruan, 1992).*

As a result, Chinese women 'naturally' had no future, no other destiny than to be married. They neither had the right to choose their husband, nor to divorce or remarry if widowed. Overall however:

*The functional importance of all women in traditional China lays in their reproductive role. In a patriarchal and authoritarian society, this reproductive function took the form of reproducing male descendants (Ibid).*

Sexuality and more widely gender relations in traditional China were fully oriented towards reproduction. The status of women remained ambiguous or marginalized at least up until the birth of a son.

The status of women began to improve in 1950 with the Marriage Law that forbade polygamy, imposed equal rights between genders, ruled marriage and divorce and was meant to protect women and children interests. 'However, it took years for the law to become more than words on paper and move into real life' (Lau, 1992). Despite this, the legal statement was restated in the Consti-

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<sup>5</sup> **Lessons for Girls.** Written by the female historian Ban Zhao (Han dynasty, ca. 45-120 C.E.), **Lessons** became one of China's most durable sources of advice about female behavior. One nugget tells women to "yield to others; let her put others first, herself last. In: Gender Difference in History Women in China and Japan, <http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/essay-04.html>.

tution of the People's Republic of China in 1954. Since then, the situation of women has dramatically improved, especially with regards to the access to paid work, but also within the family where women now participate in the decision-making:

*A Shanghai neighborhood survey reported 25 percent of the wives declared themselves the boss of the family, while 45 percent said they shared the decision-making power in their families. Similar surveys in Beijing found that 11.6 percent of the husbands have the final say in household matters, while 15.8 percent of families have wives who dominate the family decision-making. The other 72.6 percent have the husband and wife sharing in the decision-making. A survey in Nanjing revealed that 40 % of the husbands go shopping in the morning. Any husband shares kitchen work. Similar surveys of 323 families in Shanghai found 71.1 percent of husbands and wives sharing housework (Ruan, 1992).*

Despite this steady progress, gender equality remains an objective to reach that is still far away.

As far as the conception of love and sexuality is concerned, Chinese cultural norms were rather strict and conservative, accepting only heterosexual intercourse within the confines of a monogamous marriage. Let's quote once more Dr Fan-fu Ruan and M. P. Lau:

*A wide variety of sexual behaviors are explicitly proscribed. Thus prostitution, polygamy, premarital and extramarital sex (including cohabitation arrangements), homosexuality and variant sexual behavior are all illegal. Because even normal sexual expression is viewed with contempt as a less important activity of life, not only are pornography and nudity banned but any social activity with sexual implications – such as dancing – may be subject to restrictions. Even the marriage relationship is given little consideration. For example, according to official statistics, approximately 360.000 married persons live apart from their spouses and this figure increases at a rate of 100.000 per year. Most of these separations occur because individual citizens are not free to move from one place to another or to change their places of employment (Ruan, 1992; Lau, 1992).*

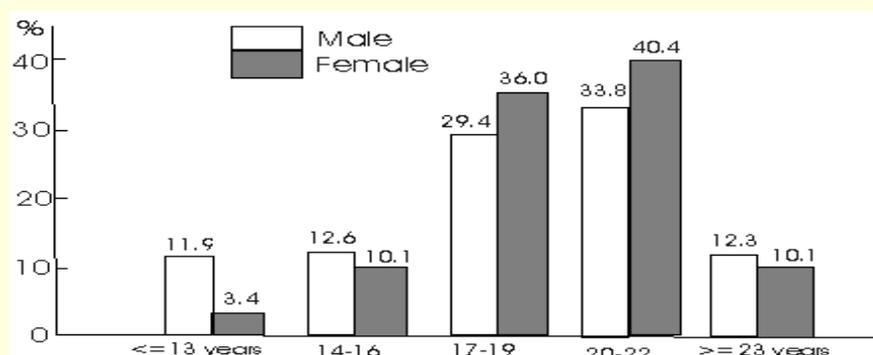
The turning point in this devaluating and repressive representation of sexuality occurred with the 'Democracy Wall Movement' in 1978 – 1979, when the government allowed young people to express their personal desires for freedom and democracy. Thus sexual liberation was one of the claims advocated by the Chinese youth. Ten years later, in 1989, this topic was taken up during the Tiananmen Square incident. The issue of sexual freedom has been raised.

### What is the situation today?

A study realized in 1989 – 1990 gives some information about the transformations that affected the new cohorts of young people after the Great Opening and the Tiananmen Square protests. While the idea that “sexual” revolution occurred seems pleasing, data has been collected on the contrary, indicating that the process of change is much better characterized by dialectic of continuity and change. The clearest indicator that behavior is changing can be found in the fact that the first sexual intercourse occurs at an earlier age, in a same way that premarital sex and extra-marital sexual relations has increased.

However, this survey provides tremendous amount of data that supports the idea of a steady continuity. The most striking point is the prudish silence that surrounds this domain of human activity. Sex is something not to talk about, and as stated in an article released in 2003, it is ‘*still a dirty word*’. Overall, however, it appears from the survey that sex is still something that “does not matter very much”, giving room to many ambiguities. For instance, people declare to be generally satisfied with their sexual life, although they expressed dissatisfaction when entering into the details. As mentioned earlier, premarital and extramarital affairs increased but this brings about ‘a great deal of controversy’. *‘The status of women has improved, but few are concerned with the quality of their sex lives, including the women themselves’*. And as underlined in the report: *‘Many try various ways to enhancing sexual pleasure, but they only do so secretly, and there is no open agreement that it is all right’*. In short, during the 1980s, sexual behaviors were on the onset of becoming more liberal, but sexuality is still something that is not of prime importance and overall it is something that has to be kept silent.

Figure 1: Age of First Sexual Intercourse



Ten years later, a team of researchers carried out a comprehensive survey in order to examine 'current sexual behaviors', with one leading question: Is China experiencing a revolution in sexual behavior? (Parish, Laumann, Mojola, 2007).

Again a few indicators provide a clear picture of the current ongoing change. First of all, signs of a great improvement of the conditions of living. The age of puberty declined sharply from 15 for women in 1950 to 13.39 in 2006, and for men from 17.5 to 14.43.

Due to a strong policy to delay marriage, the men's median age of first sexual intercourse in urban areas took place at the age of 25 in the 1970s. Two decades later, in 1990, the median age for men decreased to 22.5 years. For women, during the 1950s and the 1960s, the age of sexual intercourse was concomitant with marriage. However, in the 1980s, a U-turn occurred with a significant delay of the age of sexual intercourse:

*'By the 1980s median age at first sex had risen from a low of 21.5 years to almost 24 years. But it fell to about 22.5 a decade later in 1990s. – As in the case of men a decline of almost two years. It is noteworthy that no more than one fourth of either men or women had sex before age 20. Chinese urban teenagers, in other words remained mostly virgins even in the 1990s'* (Parish, Laumann, Mojola, 2007).

The age for marriage was directly driven by state policy that strongly recommended postponing the weddings. During the 1950s, both men and women married at around 24.2 years. After the introduction of state incentives and regulations, this age was delayed to 25.2 for men, and 24.5 for women.

Traditionally, the first sex is connected with marriage. However, the last decade has known a significant increase of premarital sex (Yan, 2003).

*In urban areas, fewer than 15 percent of either men or women who reached age 20 before 1964 had experienced premarital sex...For all types of premarital sex, the peak in more recent years was 30 percent for women and 40 percent or more among men* (Parish, Laumann, Mojola, 2007).

Thus, responding to the question that led this investigation of whether China experiences a sexual revolution, the answer is definitively affirmative. This is true for urban areas, but also for the countryside, even though it occurred to a far lesser extent. However, the width of the ongoing transformation should not be overestimated, to the extent that virginity still remains the norm before the age of 20, and the median gap between the age of first sex and the age of marriage remains at only one year or less. (Parish, Laumann, Mojola, 2007).

The so-called 'revolution' in sexual behaviors amongst the new cohorts was initiated during the 1980s, in the context of the Great Opening. It is only in the 1990s that the changes gained momentum in a significant way. Political decisions, changes in family policies, the rise of the market economy and the explo-

sion of consumption amongst young people that was accompanied by the development of a liberal culture among the youth, all these are somehow part of the specificity of the Chinese context in which youth cohorts are shaped and may be turned into a specific generation. Despite this, the uniqueness of these Chinese generations should be once more relativized. By comparing the changes occurring in Western countries, in Asia and in emerging countries, there is some evidence that China is basically enshrined in a pattern that is common to neighboring countries in the Asian region. For instance, in Western countries, the gap between the first sex and first marriage represents 10 years, whereas in Asian countries these two events happen nearly simultaneously. In these countries, these two events are the most delayed and the gap between them is usually the shortest. Concerning the Chinese women, the pattern of sexual behaviors appears to be very similar to that of the young women in developing countries, especially concerning the fact that women have premarital sex most of the time only with their fiancé.

*Overall, then, China is striking in its comparatively delayed onset of sexual activity among both men and women. In particular, we note Chinese men's relatively late age at first sex and limits of premarital sex compared to men in most other countries. Marriage among the Chinese women also appears comparatively delayed though on average it still occurs earlier than in several Western countries* (Parish, Laumann, Mojola, 2007).

In short, the Chinese pattern of sexual activity is similar to those that can be encountered in other developed Asian countries. The so-called "traditional Asian model" appears to be resilient. However, two factors have propelled a strong and fast change. First, a strong impulse from the state to postpone marriage and to limit the birth and second, a process of modernization that affects every domain of private life, bringing about deep changes in family formation, family structure, sexual behavior and generation relationships. Two decades have been necessary to put this process of change in motion.

In the 1960s in the US, the publication of Margaret Mead's book 'Generation Gap' was a hallmark, pointing out the coming of a new generation forged in a radically different context from that of their parents whose experience was regarded as irrelevant. For scholars, the challenge and then the risk was that the 1950s and 1960s 'generation' had to invent their own culture and their own references from scrap. At the time, this thesis gave birth to a lot of discussions. However, in the face of the evidence that can be collected, it is difficult to retain such a thesis to come across the present situation of the new Chinese generation.

The signs of social and cultural transformation are obvious:

- More pre marital sex
- More partners

- Greater inclination to live together without being married, as a marriage trial
- Platonic cohabitation
- More tolerance towards public display of sexual attraction.
- Maybe more significantly, the end of the repressive silence that weighs on any subject relating to sexual activity that operated a few decades ago. Sexual behaviors changed in the same time as social discourses about it. In that sense, China, or at least urban China, is becoming more permissive.

While the practices and the environment are changing significantly it has nothing to do with the radical gap between the new generation and the previous ones. Since 1980 the process of change is on its way. However, it is inscribed in continuity.

### **Conclusive remarks: Is there a new generation and what is the fabric?**

‘China is the future of the world’; ‘China offers much more opportunity’; from the 160 international students who have been interviewed in Beijing between 2005 – 2006, there is not a single one of them who has not mentioned these kinds of declarations. Reports and newspaper articles fuel such representations. Over the last decades, the Chinese GDP has grown at the pace of a double digit.

Such dramatic change should result in a deep generational gap between the young generation and their elders.

This statement is the clearest and the most consistent point that contains the corpus of the generation theory. A generation is not a cohort, it is a conceptual artifact that brings together individuals that have experienced the same event in the same time: birth, marriage, first birth, divorce or entrance in college or university etc. A generation is not a ‘sui generis’ social or cultural phenomenon. It is a social construction that is brought about by a deep and irreversible change in the context of socialization of a given cohort (Attias-Donfut 1989).

However, the impact of the social and cultural change is not equal for each member of the given cohort. In other words, the exposure of individuals to social transformation is different for all those who experience a historical event at the same period of their life. Then, they share some kind of contemporaneity, signaled out by reference to that historical hallmark, which is supposed to give all these dispersed and diverse individuals some sort of unity. By these events and through ordinary discussions made in daily life, the so-called ‘generations’ are given ‘names’: Post World War II generation’, ‘Baby Boom Generation’, Baby boom of the Algeria war, ‘68 Generation’, and in the case of China the “Generation 80s” and eventually the “Tiananmen Generation”. The most serious appellations are referring to non-questionable historical events that have strongly and durably marked a few cohorts, turning them into ‘social generations’. Karl Mannheim, however, underlined the fact that these appellations refe-

rred to a unity of frontage that is divided between various 'generational units' (Mannheim, 1929).

With regards to this point, it should be taken into account that not all the Chinese youth is influenced in the same way or with the same strength to the process of social change that is operating all-in-all in the global context of China. The increasing gap between the countryside and urban areas has been mentioned several times, since it is now obvious and well documented. The distance between classes is also a dividing factor. Being a college student or being exposed to the market has indeed an impact on the fabric of generation units.

In short, the Chinese context is clearly characterized by a deep, strong, fast transformation that creates an atmosphere of a new 'epoch'. There is a gap, a break, and a difference that has been created: a difference that has been introduced since the 1980s and that accelerated during the 1990s. Not all young people, however, are breathing that new atmosphere with the same intensity.

A generation is made of such differences. A generation exists only because it is 'different' from the previous one and from the following. A generation is a rupture, but it is also a reproduction. It is also a continuity. The figures that have been supplied all along this paper support this statement in China today. The change within the Chinese youth still operates within a strong and steady continuity. Forces of change and forces of continuity are intermingled. When here or there some scholars have taken the risk of qualifying the surge of differences as 'revolution', in the China of today such terminology would be in many respects inappropriate. The coming of a new generation or, more precisely, the coming of new generation units into the Chinese scenery is made of continuity of change. And indeed, since the sociologist is in no way a prophet, that observation is irrespective of what could happen in a near future.

The remark that might be put forward as a conclusion is much more a question or a series of questions: what is the role and impact of the 'new generation' in the process of change taking place in China? Is the new Chinese generation a social force able to propel social, cultural, and political transformations? Or at the opposite of this, is this generation the mere production of the ongoing structural transformation that operates in China?

Such questions fuelled the debates, discussions, and works of scholars in the US and in Europe during the 1960s. The UNESCO at that time released a special issue of the journal *Review International of Social Sciences*, with the title 'Youth: a social force?' (UNESCO, 1972). With the passing of time, such questions seem a bit metaphysical. Another approach has been recently developed that sees 'youth' as a 'sensitive plate' that is reflecting in its own way the impulses it receives (Commissariat General du Plan, 2001). In that sense, the youth is in the same time the actor and the product. It produces and is produced. It participates in the process of change and is transformed by it.

Thus the genuine question for further academic research would be how does the youth intervene in this process, and what is its impact? But also what is transmitted and received from the elder generations? How this transmission is assimilated, incorporated and transformed?

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