

CHAPTER ONE

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND YOUTH STUDIES IN CHINA

A Review of Sociological Research from the Past Decade

Since the revival of social science research in China in the 1980s, youth studies have been a significant but relatively independent part of the discipline.¹ Fast economic growth and dramatic social changes have brought major changes to living standards. There have also been significant transformations of the social environment, with attitudes and opinions changing along with the times. As a result, we have seen the rise of large “generation gaps.” Millennials, born in the 1980s and 1990s, have become manifestations of all that is new, leading sociologists to use the study of young people as a way to examine social change and the trends that will shape our future society. The major themes of youth studies over the past ten years represent the latest developments through which the discipline of sociology understands the most recent changes in Chinese society.

In the past decade, given the fast growth of China’s economy, young people have been offered unprecedented opportunities for personal development. At the same time, they have faced unprecedented challenges and new problems. Youth studies in this period clearly illustrate this situation. The sociological study of young people can, of course, touch upon every aspect of social life, but at this moment the focus of youth studies is very clear: it tackles the new

The original Chinese version of this chapter first appeared in *China Social Sciences Today* on May 10, 2017, under the title, “Research into Issues around Chinese Young People against a Backdrop of Social Transformation.” This current version has been edited by the author.

problems that a fast-changing society is presenting to young people as well as the strategies young people can use to address them. Youth studies in this period have focused on two groups of young people: young migrants from the countryside working in the cities, and university students and graduates.

These two groups are now experiencing more changes and competitive pressure than they have ever known. Sociologists' attention on these groups reflects their recognition of the yawning gap between young people and older generations as well as the significant differences within the millennial generation. Over this period, the internet has spread with breathtaking speed and become enmeshed within every aspect of young people's lives; thus, the internet's impact on young people has become an important area for youth studies. Another major area of research focuses on the changes in young people's spending patterns and values, which reveal the impacts of social change.

The Emergence and Development of Youth Sociology in China

Youth studies is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses sociology, educational research, psychology, demographics, and politics. However, in China, sociology plays a leading role in the field. This sociological approach, which has been even more pronounced over the last ten years, often shapes the direction of mainstream youth studies. Part of the reason is that *Youth Studies* (China's most influential journal of youth studies, which is perceived to have the highest academic standards) is edited and published by the Institute of Sociology (part of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, CASS). Since a relaunch in 2009, this journal has shifted from a generalist youth studies orientation to become a journal mainly of youth sociology. This phenomenon has hastened development in the field of youth sociology in recent years and has oriented youth studies toward sociological methods and theory.

The adoption of a sociological orientation has clearly improved the academic quality of youth studies. China's three other major youth studies journals—*China Youth Study*, *Contemporary Youth Research*, and *Youth Exploration*—are also on some level grounded in sociology. *Contemporary Youth Research* publishes sociologically oriented research and was originally published by a youth studies institute attached to the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS); now it is part of SASS's Institute of Sociology. *China Youth Study* and *Youth Exploration* are both published by subsidiary organizations of the Chinese Communist Youth League's (CCYL's) China Youth & Children Research Center and the Guangzhou Youth Research Association, and they tend to focus on

youth policy and political education. However, their academic focus is also increasingly tied to sociological perspectives. This trend in the academic journals has made empirical research, guided by sociological methods, the main focus of youth studies over the past decade. In particular, there has been a large volume of quantitative work offering analyses of survey data.

In China, youth studies has one particularly striking feature: an ongoing tension between academic research and ideology. When the economic reforms began in 1978, China had no youth studies in a formal academic sense. The discussions of government-sponsored scholars in the field centered on the normative problems of how to mold a generation of “heirs to the revolution” that was “both red and skilled.” Mao Zedong had described young people as “the morning sun” and said to them, “The world belongs to you.” His goal was to preserve the revolutionary line of the unpropertied classes forever, and in this endeavor the proper education of young people was key. Therefore, the government was very interested in research into ideological education for young people, so ideology dominated youth studies in that period.

Youth studies as an academic discipline began in the 1980s and steadily grew with the economic reforms.² The economic reforms that began in 1978 had a jarring effect on the ideologies that came before them. Young people who had been taught that they should hold “revolutionary beliefs” were left in a state of philosophical confusion. The official youth education efforts ran into enormous challenges, and policymakers realized the urgent need for more incisive youth research. In 1980, the CASS and the CCYL jointly founded an institute for youth studies, the Youth Research Institute (Qingshaonian Yanjiusuo) and started the journal *Qingnian Yanjiu* (Youth Studies) for internal circulation (i.e., only available to government-sponsored researchers). This institution represented the beginning of academic youth studies. However, the uneasy combination of both academic and ideological orientations meant that the discipline of youth studies remained the site of frequent controversies and reversals. Institutions and key figures within the field were subject to frequent turnover.

The first institute was housed in the headquarters of the CCYL and served essentially as an affiliated department, but it was managed jointly with the CASS. During the early 1980s, the researchers from this organization were among the emancipated youth of the “thought emancipation movement,” and their research represented new, modern approaches.³ However, this stance took them increasingly farther out of alignment with the work of the CCYL. Ultimately, the institute was disbanded, and its researchers were attached to the new Institute of Sociology, part of the CASS. A few years later, the CCYL set up the China

Youth and Children Research Center, which has since become the country's leading and largest institution for youth studies. The CCYL's China Youth University of Political Studies in Beijing, and its network of provincial universities, set up departments for youth studies, which trained a cohort of new researchers.

After the political turmoil of 1989, the government clearly recognized that the ideologies circulating among university students constitute a key factor in China's social cohesion and consensus. They ramped up the level of political education directed at university students: the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) research and education departments were set up at every university to carry out ideological studies and training, and to observe any other trends in the psychology or behavior of students. Starting in 1990, youth studies at the CASS went into decline, and researchers gradually shifted into other areas. Research groups were closed down or reduced in size. Throughout the 1990s and the early years of this century, the CCYL and ideological educators in universities were the primary leaders in the field of youth studies in China. The focus was on ideological work, particularly in universities. Purely academic youth studies did not set the agenda for the field. However, there had been some research into youth issues from those outside the field. For example, studies by sociologist Feng Xiaotian and others focused on only children,⁴ sociologist Chen Yingfang's work focused on youth culture,⁵ and psychologists provided a considerable body of work on youth psychology.

Over the last ten years, the focus of the field has shifted away from ideology. At the start of this century, the generation born in the 1980s (the "post-'80s") burst into the public arena, presenting an image of alternative lifestyles and a lack of respect for authority. They have used the internet and "youth literature" to deliver fierce rebuttals of the criticisms heaped on them by various authority figures and the official media.⁶ The 1980s generation, very different from those that came before, has seriously challenged the government's youth projects and ideological education. This generation has also exposed significant limitations in the models of youth research associated with ideological projects. At the same time, sociologists have become increasingly interested in the attitudes and behaviors of the younger generation and their impact on society. They have realized that the gulf between the generations is a key feature of China at this moment. The younger generation is changing the country and will set the direction for China in the future. Over the last ten years, a more sociological approach to youth studies has swiftly developed, and a large body of research has been published. Sociologists' work frequently closely tracks the focus of public interest, particularly the interests of young people, and as a result often

attracts public comment. The methodological advantage of sociology has also meant that youth studies with a sociological flavor is more insightful and more convincing. Quantitative research, with surveys of large samples, enables systematic studies of all aspects of the differences between generations, facilitates a comprehensive picture of the attitudes and behavior of young people, and elicits the causal relations among them. Through in-depth interviews, sociologists have been able to examine the subgroups within the younger generation and explore their values and motivations.

The rise of sociological youth studies has also had an impact on youth researchers in the CCYL system and ideological instructors at universities. Their research began to borrow the research tools in the sociologist's toolbox, and there has been a corresponding decline in focus on doctrine and empty lecturing. As a result, youth studies in China now has three main areas of focus: the sociology-based youth studies at the CASS, the Youth League's work based around its ideological mandate, and work in the universities, focusing mainly on issues in education. These three elements make up the diverse landscape of contemporary youth studies in China.

The impact of sociological youth studies goes beyond questions of methodology; it can also be seen in the choice of research topics. The relaunch of sociological youth studies coincided with the birth of the 1980s generation, and the study of those born in the 1980s and later in the 1990s has become a staple of contemporary youth studies, along with the relationships between these groups and the changes in China's society, economy, culture, and politics. This research is often comparative across age demographics, exploring the behavior and attitudes of Chinese millennials, uncovering the differences between one generation (often defined by decade of birth) and another, and explaining the causes of these differences. At the same time, researchers remain aware of the enormous differences in class and the gaps between the urban and rural experiences within each generation. As a result, youth studies can roughly be broken down into two major classes, associated with different research subjects. Studies on groups that have received higher education (e.g., university students, graduates, white-collar urban workers) may touch on youth culture and lifestyle, employment, online behavior, consumption patterns, or political attitudes. Another major category of studies is on young migrant workers (*nongmin gong*). This research often examines the problems young migrant workers face, their reasons for migration, social inclusion, or campaigns for workers' rights. These two areas, which we can call college student studies and migrant worker studies, have been the most productive in youth studies over

the past decade. Certain studies bridge the gap between them, but the differences between these two areas cannot be ignored.

The great variation within young cohorts means that inequality is a vastly important topic within youth studies. The two areas of research that have been most prominent in youth studies—inequality in education and employment, and young migrant workers—are also those that have received the most research attention in mainstream sociology. Since education and employment are key factors in the ability of young people to support themselves and build a career, education and employment are major topics within youth studies. Sociological youth studies differ from educational studies or economic research given the interest in structural factors (e.g., China's urban-rural dual structure, the official status of inquiry or lack thereof, family or class background, etc.) that affect education and employment and the resulting inequalities.⁷ These have been core issues for the field of sociology as a whole over the last ten years. The situation of migrant workers in China's cities has been a key area for sociological investigation for more than a decade; in the last ten years, attention has been focused increasingly on young workers. As a result, young workers in the cities have become an important subject for sociologically oriented youth studies, and large volumes of research have been published.

The field of sociological youth studies is also made up of young people. Researchers are mainly from the generations born in the 1970s and 1980s. These researchers are highly sensitive to recent social changes, particularly the novelties and changes that directly impact the lives of young people. The rise of the internet and its effect on youth culture is one example; another is changing attitudes toward love, marriage, and sex (including gender relations). In a fast-changing society, shifts in values and behavior are inevitable, and attitudes toward love, marriage, and sex are one major aspect of this. Because young people are living out these changing values, their views and behavior represent the direction of future change in terms of marriage and sex.

Another fruitful area for sociologically oriented youth studies has been research into the beliefs, attitudes, and values of young people. One of the changes in the cohort of researchers has been the addition of a large number of instructors from university courses teaching normative ideology and politics. The emergence of this group of instructors is largely a result of centralized policies. Government policymakers and education departments are very much concerned with the ideologies of young people, particularly university students. They have instituted political and ideological instruction in universities, and they have encouraged instructors to conduct research in ideological instruc-

tion, which has led to a large volume of research on the ideologies and attitudes of young people. Much of this research is not academically rigorous, but it has attracted the interest of a few sociologists, who have brought more rigorous sociological methods and tools to the study of values, attitudes, and political views among contemporary young people.

The Rise of the Millennials and “Youth Culture”

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw the emergence of the millennial generation born in the 1980s. They burst into public view spectacularly, even aggressively, sparking new trends in culture and literature and becoming the dominant voice in the mass media—particularly on the internet. Cultural authorities had previously lectured and rejected them; the mainstream media had previously dismissed them as “soft.” Now, attitudes have changed, and the children of the 1980s are praised as a “community-minded” generation. The bold, flamboyant behavior of the 1980s generation and their penchant for challenging authority created a sense of a generation gap unlike any that had appeared before. During the May 4th movement in the early twentieth century, and the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, young people had been a major force for change in society.⁸ However, in both of those periods, young people were guided by more mature voices. Now, the 1980s generation are their own flagbearers: people such as Han Han, born in 1983, and Guo Jingming, born in 1982.⁹ These spiritual leaders of their generation did not have a developed ideology or lofty morality. They came to lead the children of the 1980s because they dared to challenge authority, and they were skilled in using the techniques of literature and art to reflect the moods and interests of their peers. The children of the 1980s were very united in their generational identity and were thus able to emerge swiftly as a social force. They sent shockwaves through the worlds of culture, the arts, mass media, and the new economy. The internet magnified their voice, and they also hastened the spread of the internet.

The unique nature of the 1980s generation has also been a hot topic for research in youth studies over the past decade or more. Sociologists and researchers in related fields have produced a large body of research on this generation. One of the key works has been a monograph titled *Experience, Attitudes and Social Transition: A Sociological Study of the Post-'80s Generation*.¹⁰ This volume addresses the phenomenon of the generation born in the 1980s by interweaving large-scale social trends and individual life histories. The author finds that the 1980s generation is not simply a group of individuals of similar ages; they are

young people who have formed a “generational cohort,” united by a shared experience of social change and major historical events:¹¹ “This generation shares more than just the universal features of youth as a stage of life; they also bear the deep and unique imprint that China’s social transitions left on their development.”¹² The author also finds:

The reforms and opening up that began in 1978, and the one-child policy that was instituted at the same time, are the key social factors that defined the development of the children of the 1980s. The parents of these children were the first generation of the PRC; their life stories are the story of the development of the PRC. Similarly, the children of the 1980s are the first generation of China’s transformation. Their stories cannot be disentangled from China’s march towards modernization. Research into the children of the ’80s is in fact a reflection on the changes in China’s society and a reflection on the global phenomenon of modernity.¹³

Experience, Attitudes and Social Transition uses the weight of empirical evidence to show the huge impact of China’s economic changes on the children of the 1980s:

The reforms that started at the end of the 1970s divide the generations into “planned economy” kids and “market economy” kids; for each generation, the unique combinations of ‘historical moment’ plus “stage of life” define how the social transformations affect each group of contemporaries. . . .

The children born in the 1980s were the first generation who had to make their own way, completely unprotected by the planned economy. They experienced the economic reforms, from the very start through progressive expansions, and witnessed the relentless rise of China’s economy. Their “public life” was marked by a series of reformist government policies. They experienced the massive expansion in university attendance; the end of government-assigned jobs for graduates; the urban-led economic growth and the attendant universal spread of consumerism; the shift from ideology-as-legitimacy to economic outcomes-as-legitimacy; the internet’s impact on their social and political views. Their public life, shaped by these social changes, meant that each personal life was marked by the deep imprint of structural changes in Chinese society.¹⁴

The children of the 1980s emerged first through youth literature and online culture. They developed a rebellious and alternative subculture, which gave

them a “unique and rebellious voice.” But their impact went beyond the world of culture and permeated every sociopolitical issue.¹⁵ Jiang Bing writes, “[It] was a culture . . . that completed the elimination of ideology from literature, and with the vigorous development of youth literature and online writing established itself in opposition to and as a challenge to mainstream culture. The elimination of preexisting ideologies underlay the entire development, as revealed in the following four aspects: opposition and engagement between elites and ordinary people; conflict and synthesis between the mainstream and the non-mainstream; the proclamation and development of the marginalized and the alternative; and print culture’s resistance to and negotiation with visual culture.”¹⁶

Jiang goes on to comment on the importance of the internet: “The internet was the home base for the subculture of the children of the 1980s. . . . China was at a key moment of social transformation and structural transition. In economic terms, a public space for citizens had already emerged, but in terms of its political culture, the citizen society was still very underdeveloped. It was in response to this situation that many youth institutions spontaneously appeared, born on the internet, reliant for development on its interactivity.” These self-organizing youth groups also benefited from the ease with which connected individuals could be engaged: “Self-organizing youth groups were able to use the fast two-way communication of new media to mobilize their members much more efficiently than the old methods of administrative orders and formal appointments, meetings, public education, and official reports. Young people had been given an unprecedented space for discussing public affairs and participating in campaigns; they had also obtained a more efficient and fashionable tool for organizing themselves. With these strengths, the internet and new media responded to the hunger for diversity and autonomy, and for young people’s belief in democratic participation.”¹⁷

However, researchers have also found that “the youth subculture in mainland China has expressed itself in relatively mild ways. It does not have social institutions with an explicit mission of resistance to mainstream culture, and its activities have been largely limited to the virtual sphere. Mainly it is a phenomenon of online ‘tribes,’ with only loosely organized subculture groups.”¹⁸

Social Division and Inequality in Education and Employment

Youth studies over the past decade reflects two of the major sociological features of contemporary Chinese youth: the clearly demarcated generational identity

on the one hand, and the striking class differences on the other. A large volume of research points out the obvious differences between the younger generations and their middle-aged or senior counterparts. Even within the millennial generation, there are differences between those born in the 1980s and those born in the 1990s, or between those born in 1980–85 and those born in 1985–90. In addition, there are very obvious differences across various social groupings. These two types of dissimilarities are reflected in two flavors of youth research, each focusing on a different subject group. One group comprises university students and graduates (including young urban white-collar workers); the other is made up of young workers in the cities without official urban residence. Urban workers and university students (and graduates) make up the two major subgroups among China's young adults, and there are massive differences in their experiences, work, lifestyles, and future opportunities. Some of the shorthand terms common in the popular media illustrate the yawning gap between the rich and poor among China's youth: "rich kids" and "officials' kids" versus "poor kids" and "farmer kids"; "tall, rich, and handsome" and "light-skinned, rich, and beautiful" versus "loser" and "short, dwarfish, and poor."¹⁹ Family background has come to be seen as one of the major sources of social inequality, a phenomenon referred to colloquially as "Who's got the richest daddy?" As Li and Shi et al. point out, the children of the 1980s "bear the indelible marks of both their generation and their class. . . . Their unity as a generation has not interrupted the transmission of social inequality; their shared culture cannot break down class differences in lifestyle. . . . The most important are the gap between urban and rural, and class differences based on family background. These factors have a real impact on this generation's access to education, and the two-speed education system causes serious disparities in employment, education, and socioeconomic status."²⁰

A large body of empirical research into youth employment and social mobility has demonstrated that the transmission of socioeconomic status is the major cause of class bonding among young people. Yang Juhua used census data for a diachronic study of trends in employment among young people that were working away from their official place of residence and found that "class differences continue to be transmitted and reproduced by our administrative systems and structural factors."²¹ Han Jialing et al. find that class differences are visible even during childhood: "The urban-rural dual structure makes different resources available to different groups of children and creates inequality among children. . . . Urban children have more access to resources than the other three groups of children in three respects. In terms of education, urban

resident children and urban migrant children have significantly better access to educational resources than children who live in rural areas. A similar pattern is seen in health care resources. In terms of family welfare, both official urban residents and official rural residents tend to receive more support than migrant families (families living and working in a place other than their registered place of residence) or children staying with their grandparents while their parents work in the cities. The price of moving for the sake of work is clear in this last category.”²²

Meng Bingfeng illustrates the difficulties of social mobility by examining the number of students from rural backgrounds at key universities, employment rates after graduation, and social attitudes.²³ He concludes that the very small number of students who make it from the countryside to work in a good job “directly demonstrates stagnation in social mobility and the ossification of the class system.”²⁴ However, while observing the process of the formation of elites, Zhang Yue, Zhang Yi, Lu Qiang, and others found that despite a clear tendency for the elite class to bolster and reproduce itself, the routes to upward mobility have not been entirely closed off. Lu Qiang examined the process of finding a first job for young elites: “Elite managers obtain their resources in a fairly closed way, but for elite technical personnel, access to resources is more open. Among non-elites there is a significant level of preferential transmission of resources.”²⁵ Zhang Yue and Zhang Yi studied how young people obtain professional positions: “During the transition to a market economy, individual ability and higher degrees became more important factors in the selection of people for jobs. However, these systems did not entirely prevent the self-perpetuation of elites. Political and technological elites are able to pass on their status to the next generation. But the extent of this self-perpetuation and the ossification of class boundaries were limited. Family background did play a foundational role in the formation of young elites, but the importance of this criterion did not balloon out of all proportion.”²⁶

Education is an important tool for young people from rural areas or other underprivileged groups trying to break the cycle of inherited social status. In addition, market competition plays a vital role in modern societies as it is deemed a key factor in determining a person’s future socioeconomic status. However, inequality in educational opportunities puts children from rural areas or other underprivileged groups at a disadvantage and ultimately reinforces the inheritance of class status. Researchers such as Wu Yuxiao and this author have demonstrated that over the past decade or more, urban-rural inequality in education has worsened. The gap in high school (ages 15–18) and university enrollment

rates between urban and rural children has grown wider.²⁷ Describing the educational opportunities available to the generation born in the 1980s, Li writes, “Many rural children are knocked out of the education system at each transition, from primary to middle school, middle school to high school, and high school to higher education (plus those who drop out during secondary schooling). Most of the rural students who make it up the educational ladder still only end up at second- or third-tier universities, and when they complete their degree they face another, even harder challenge: obtaining stable work with the potential to develop their careers. For rural children, the old saying rings true: Men of importance rarely come from the provinces.”²⁸ While surveying students at a key university in Beijing every year from 2007 to 2012, Huang Silin, Xin Ziqiang, and Hou Jiawei found trends of increasing inequality between urban and rural students as well as between students from different classes, particularly following the introduction of the “independent university admissions” policy.²⁹ “The socio-economic status of the family became obviously more predictive of university admission over time. This was particularly striking in terms of competition among middle-class and upper-class families. The massive effect of place of residence and the *hukou* (household registration) system persists, with urban/nonfarmer households clearly advantaged.³⁰ Independent university admissions systems further advantaged children from middle- and upper-class families and stretched the university admissions gap between the classes even wider.”³¹

Research into educational inequality has taken a particular interest in the very least advantaged group of children: those of migrant workers in the cities. This group can be broken down into two subgroups: migrant children (who live and go to school in the cities with their parents) and left-behind children (who remain in their rural place of residence while their parents work in the cities).³² In his research on rural children who drop out of school, Zhou Xiaozhen finds, “Large scale, sustained migration out of the villages means that rural ways of life, social institutions, and family structures are undergoing fundamental changes. This has had a lasting impact on rural schools and education. . . . Rural children start the educational race at a disadvantage; when their parents are absent, their lives and education become even more difficult. . . . All of these factors, combined with increasingly utilitarian views of education, are pushing many children to give up on education when they run into obstacles and choose to work instead and make a little money.”³³ Lu Lidan finds, “When left-behind children reach high school age, their educational opportunities are dramatically reduced. When a left-behind child leaves school, they generally follow in their parents’ footsteps and move to the city to find work. All too

quickly, they stop being left-behind children and become the next generation of urban labor.”³⁴

Finally, there is a large body of research that finds that children who grow up in the city without being registered urban residents are the most disadvantaged when it comes to education. They leave school and enter the labor market too early, and their lack of education ultimately makes them losers in the labor marketplace. This in turn widens the class gap within the youth cohort.³⁵ As Cao Jing points out, “The urban-rural dual structure that means developing urban education in the cities first . . . [plus] admissions policies based on ‘market potential’ and academic grades [and] the limitations on opportunities for rural students inherent in the key universities system all combine to create an educational exclusion effect for rural students.” Education has thus never played its theoretical role as a driver of upward social mobility for rural young people.³⁶

Identity and Social Integration

Young workers in China’s cities have been an important topic for recent sociological research. As a major part of the contemporary young generation, young migrant workers have inevitably become the most important subject for youth studies. One area of research has been focused on their group identity and on social inclusion. Unlike the older generation of urban migrant workers, most young workers want to live permanently in the cities and ultimately hope to become urban residents. However, the process of becoming a real urban resident is extremely complex, and there are many barriers to social inclusion. Zhang Qingwu identifies a number of different dimensions for social integration among young workers in the cities and finds that progress along each dimension may occur at different speeds, creating an “uneven integration” effect. Cultural integration tends to proceed most quickly, followed by lifestyle integration, with policy and economic equality progressing the slowest. The *hukou* system and its attendant policies of discrimination are the main factors impeding social integration for young people who move to work in the cities.³⁷ Zhang Lu finds problems of split identities (strong identification with home region, weak identification with new city location) and marginalization (weak identification with both home region and city location) among young workers in the cities, which can impede their social integration.³⁸ Liu Jian’e has carried out further in-depth research into political equality for young workers in the cities. She concludes that there is no path to full equality for young people with

rural *hukou* working in the cities as of yet; they lack resources, and their level of political integration remains low. The main obstacle is the insufficiency of formal political organizations, which means that these young workers lack political capital and avenues for participation: those without local *hukou* are often unable to join local branches of the CCP, labor unions, or community organizations. As a result, they do not have formal channels through which to express their interests and needs.³⁹ Wu Weidong surveyed ten major cities, including Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Tianjin, to understand levels of labor union participation among young workers. He finds that young migrants face barriers, including a general lack of union organizations, and discrimination by job title or signing of a formal employment contract. He also notes that among young workers, an increased perception of the value of union membership drives further union participation.⁴⁰

The difference between the welfare systems in rural and urban areas is one of the major obstacles to the integration of rural residents into the cities. Wang Guohua finds that government welfare systems do not cover young workers with rural residencies. The outcome of the current policy is that although young people want to be part of the urban systems, they are tied to the rural welfare systems in their official place of residence; hence they do not comply with paying into the village welfare system. As a result, they often end up with access to neither and lose their social welfare, including “health insurance, pensions, unemployment insurance, maternity leave, workers’ compensation. . . . Without these protections, an individual lacks certain survival resources, lacks protection in the event of an emergency, and lacks the security to support entrepreneurial development beyond labor services. . . . In terms of basic protections, therefore, it is almost impossible for young workers without urban residence to fully participate in either the urban or the rural systems.”⁴¹

Other researchers offer a more optimistic take on social integration for young workers in the cities. For example, Yang Juhua et al. surveyed real-time data from 106 cities across China and found that 50.2 percent of workers with rural origins have successfully obtained urban status, signifying that China has successfully managed to integrate half of the workers migrating to its cities. They believe that economic factors are crucial to the urbanization of incoming workers, along with other significant factors across several dimensions, including personal circumstances, sense of identity, and community engagement.⁴²

Young workers in the cities are unlike the past generations of workers, who endured their difficulties with little complaint. Young workers often resist in drastic ways when their employers harm their interests or when government

agencies fail to do their job. The activities of this group have been discussed in terms of a “new working class” or even the revival of a form of neo-Marxism that has become an important new theoretical approach in Chinese sociology.⁴³ Theoreticians have pointed to young workers in the cities as an example of class formation and claim that a new working class is emerging.⁴⁴ Workers “recognize that they need a collective, class strength. . . . The resistance of workers is in fact a form of political resistance. Workers must know that they are a class, unite, and become a class come together to become a force. This is how they mature as a class.”⁴⁵ Particularly in the years since 2010, when a series of suicides by young workers at Foxconn brought the issue into sharp focus, there has been a surge in publications on this topic. The research is often qualitative and uses in-depth analyses of individual case studies to examine the formation of a new working class. It is very much influenced by the “factory regime” approach of the American sociologist Michael Burawoy. By analyzing labor relations in the workplace, they show how the “hegemonic” capitalist system of production exploits workers. Cheng Pingyuan et al. examine the quasi-military factory regime at Foxconn and how it obtains an “absolute surplus . . . by imposing long working hours, docking workers’ wages, and all kinds of hard labor.”⁴⁶ Zhang Chunlong applies Foucault’s concept of the “panopticon” and has interviews with factory workers and observations at factories to uncover panopticon structures at modern factories, which utilize a wide range of technologies and methods to monitor, discipline, and control.⁴⁷ “Under these systems of discipline, workers from rural areas are monitored and their behavior modified. They develop the qualities of an industrial workforce.”⁴⁸ Huang Zhihui focuses on those employed in the informal sector, outside of the “factory polity.” He refers to workers without formal employers as “independent economic entities,” observing those urban market gardeners in the Pearl Delta and the exurbs of Beijing and laborers working in the building and decorating market in Jinan. He finds that these independent economic entities are at the mercy of the capital markets; they are connected into the “factory polity” and, in fact, to the entire capitalist chain of production. “The independence of ‘independent economic entities’ is just a surface phenomenon. . . . Both their working processes and the value of their labor are subject to . . . the control of the corporate economic system, and the work gang system of the building sites. . . . [T]hey are all at the mercy of the whole industrial market. The laborers who make up ‘independent economic entities’ have no voice. . . . The whole market system has achieved hegemony, and plays the ‘factory of the world’ like a conductor’s baton.”⁴⁹ The two foregoing studies examine the formation of a working class through the

lens of capitalist production and labor relations, whereas Wu Yubin looks at the emergence of class consciousness in terms of consumption. Using workers at Foxconn as his sample, he interrogates their sense of membership in a distinctive “migrant worker” class, their consciousness of class resistance, and their understanding of the class as a whole. Ultimately, he finds that young workers’ class consciousness is expressed on an individual level.⁵⁰

Most of the research into young workers in the city deals with blue-collar workers engaged in physical labor, but there are also some studies looking at white-collar workers, sometimes referred to as new migrants. Some of these new migrants come from the villages, a number from smaller towns and cities, and most of them have secondary or some higher education. Lian Si notes that in the larger cities, “a large new group has appeared —new migrants.” New migrants have the following features: they do not hold residence in the city where they live and work, so they cannot join the local urban welfare system. Their highly unstable working lives mean that they are placed in a precarious, doubly marginalized socioeconomic status, unable to integrate into the city and unable to return to their rural place of origin. The high cost of living and their low incomes distinguish new migrants from urban residents, and so they have developed a shared identity as a group at the bottom of the social ladder. Lian Si’s survey finds that though most new migrants feel that their income is “adequate” or even “OK,” most see their socioeconomic status as being “lower middle” or “low.” Lian finds that 81.5 percent of white-collar workers and 85.1 percent of young migrant workers see themselves as belonging to the lowest class. These shared features make them an identifiable group and are the basis for a shared culture.⁵¹ Cong Yufei uses survey data from Shanghai to systematically assess the development of an identity among new white-collar migrants and its impact on their social confidence. He finds three subgroups within new white-collar migrants: rooted, marginalized, and floating. Alienation causes varying levels of social confidence, with small differences within each group and relatively large differences between groups. Further analysis finds that the institutional lack of a support base for these new migrants and their disturbed social identities are also important factors in the development of social trust within this group.⁵²

The Internet, Youth Culture, and Political Engagement

The young people alive today have been named the internet generation. They are the most active group online, and youth researchers have examined the

deep impact of the rise of the internet society on the lives, attitudes, behaviors, and cultural norms of young people in many different ways. Li Wenge and Chen Lihong find that the internet communities of young people have grown up alongside young people online. These virtual communities deliver media, entertainment, and social contact. Their key features include the young age of participants, democratic behavior, diverse culture, and practical functions. Young people interact emotionally and intellectually online, developing a unique culture.⁵³ Deng Zhiqiang finds problems with youth identity in the internet era: tension between young people's virtual identities and real identities, uncertainty in young people's social identities, increased resistance to young people's social identities, and changing social fields.⁵⁴ Nie Wei finds that the internet is already a pervasive part of the daily lives of young people: "Online consumption, online interaction, online leisure and entertainment, online political participation . . . these have become the new trends and new normal in the lives of young people. This new lifestyle has given young people new life experiences; at the same time, it has raised the problem of alienation in youth behavior."⁵⁵ Lu Xiangjun explores the impact of the internet on socialization among young people. He notes that the appearance and extremely rapid spread of the internet, and changes in how information is obtained and processed, have significantly increased uncertainty in the socialization process and socialization outcomes for young people.⁵⁶

The phenomenon of Singles' Day (November 11) has attracted the attention of many researchers as a product of youth internet trends.⁵⁷ Researchers have paid particular attention to the impact of commercialization and consumerism. Wang Lu looks at consumerism and the e-commerce vendor Taobao as an example of commercial subordination of the youth subculture. She finds that the subculture has been entirely absorbed by commercial interests, to the point that the original "singles" meaning of 11/11 has been entirely replaced by another meaning: "online shopping day." The conditions for this e-commerce takeover lie in the holiday's unique origins, its simple cultural meaning, its highly specific audience, and the shared medium through which they experience the day. She concludes, "Singles' Day was always a product of the youth subculture, so it could never escape the internet and commerce, and in the end it was absorbed and dissolved by the controlling culture."⁵⁸ Wang Xiuyan also notes that the root cause of the change in Singles' Day lies in the special contradictions of modern leisure. The economic attributes and the cultural attributes of leisure were mutually reinforcing, but as they evolved, the economic attribute began overpowering the cultural attribute.⁵⁹ The evolution of Singles' Day from a

youth subculture tradition into a purely commercial shopping day is just one example of the corrosion of youth culture by commerce. In fact, the culture of millennials, which appeared so rebellious in the late 1990s and early years of this century, has within the past ten years been comprehensively commercialized. Youth literature and online literature, classic mediums of millennial culture, have suffered the same fate. The flagbearers of the 1980s generation (Han Han, Guo Jingming, etc.) have been through the process as well. The rebel leaders of the children of the 1980s have transformed into cultural merchants and dealers in fashion.

The effect of the internet on young people's political participation and political behavior has been another hot area in youth research over the last few years. Research in this area often attempts to develop policy recommendations on how the government can better guide and control the political expression of young people online and avoid large-scale protests that could affect social stability. Wang Yan et al. surveyed online political participation among nearly 500 students at universities in Zhejiang. Their analysis discusses those students' perceptions of political action and their behavior online. They find that university students' online political activity does to some extent offset the political "blank" in their offline lives. However, there is still a need for more development of political participation by students, and there are significant problems with online political expression: lack of tangible results, and major gaps between intention and behavior. One commentator remarks, "In real life, there is a disconnect between students' political attitudes and their actions. Most contemporary students have relatively high levels of political awareness, but there is a big gap between this awareness and their levels of action. Those students who are very active in political expression online are rather backward when it comes to real-world political activities."⁶⁰

Wang Yan also finds that students face four problems over the course of their political activities: (1) they are limited to a spectator's role; (2) they are well motivated, but rather capricious and undirected; (3) there is a large gap between their sense of internal political ability and external political potency; and (4) they have a level of enthusiasm for political action, but their political behavior is not well directed.⁶¹ Some researchers worry that the intersection of youth political action with the internet could easily produce large-scale protests, particularly with the agitation of certain online celebrities (known as big Vs), and that this could have a negative social impact.⁶² These researchers suggest that "the political activity of Chinese young people is immature and disorderly in many ways. . . . There is a need to mobilize many forces to lead and shepherd

the young public into healthy and rational participation in political activities, including the state, the government, private society, and universities. They can push young people's online politics and national political stability into a virtuous spiral of reinforcement and make them sustainable."⁶³ Meng Liyan analyzes 218 examples of online protest and carries out an in-depth study of the processes underlying them: their origins, how they attracted attention, how they developed, how long they persisted, and government responses. She finds, "In online large-scale protests, rational factors play virtually no role. Social identity is the motivating system behind online protest, and its primary cause is conflict between the government or a government worker and the public."⁶⁴

One of the topics that comes up frequently in discussions of the behavior of young people online and its social effects is the phenomenon of the nationalistic "angry youth."⁶⁵ They first came to public attention with a book published in 1996 that represented the rising nationalist sentiment among young Chinese people, *China Can Say No*. As computers and the internet quickly spread across the country, "angry youth" quickly appeared in virtual spaces online. Certain websites had a particularly nationalist slant (e.g., the *Aiguo* [Patriotic] Forum and the *Tiexue* [Iron and Blood] Forum) and attracted many young people.⁶⁶ They formed online groups that developed an impassioned nationalistic stance and rhetoric. In 2003, two petitions were circulated online, attracting many signatures and comments. The first was the petition *Against Bullet Train Technology on the Beijing-Shanghai High-Speed Rail Line*; the second was the *Million Online Signatures Demanding Japanese Reparations for 9-18*.⁶⁷ They were both organized on private websites. Both attracted tens of thousands—and even millions—of online signatures within a very short time and became major news. Thus 2003 is often seen as the year when online nationalism emerged.

Early on, the "angry youth" attracted mainly positive commentary from the media and researchers. Many researchers saw their behavior as an example of citizen participation in politics and as a positive step in advancing democracy.⁶⁸ Of course, many researchers also noted the "irrational" elements of extremism in the angry youth, particularly the verbal violence often seen online. Liang Xin noted that the anger and irrationality of the angry youth were primarily directed at three targets: "First there is irrational anger at the West. The angry youth maintain an attitude toward the West, with its meddling in Chinese sovereignty, of 'down with the West, Chinese patriotism will never die!' They think that Western countries who proclaim the virtues of freedom, independence, and democracy are actually overstepping the mark and self-interestedly interfering in the internal affairs of other countries. . . . Secondly, they are

angry with countries that attempt to alter history. . . , Angry youth of all stripes are united by one thing: an attitude toward Japan that is close to hatred. . . , Thirdly, they are angry about inequality and unfairness within China.”⁶⁹ Liang Xin finds that “behind the so-called ‘irrational’ behavior of the angry youth there is actually a very practical issue of the demand for ‘rationality’ in society. This demand is refracted through many of the national and international issues in China during our process of development.”⁷⁰ Zheng Wei finds that “membership of the ‘angry youth’ groups is extremely complicated, but public discourse about them tends to be polarized. . . . The development of the internet, and particularly the wide use of new media, have played an important empowering role in the ‘angry youth’ phenomenon. An analysis of the hot button social issues discussed by ‘angry youth’ shows that government mechanisms for conflict resolution are the key factor in determining whether the ‘angry youth’ become aggressive or act like constructive citizens on a particular issue. The government’s varying approach to the internet decides whether online spaces turn into fermentation pits or simply valves for letting off steam.”⁷¹

New Romantic Attitudes and Behaviors

High-speed change in our society and economy has caused an obvious generation gap in terms of attitudes and behavior toward love and marriage. This is one of the major topics of investigation for youth research. In particular, a number of striking phenomena have attracted researchers’ interest. Some researchers have noted that pressure to marry and the labeling of “spinsters” can cause significant stress among young people. Yang Jiajia finds, “‘Family pressure to marry’ has class-related factors and institutional factors. It emerges where there is a gap between the idealized hopes of parents and the actual marriage practices of their children. A sociological interpretation and analysis finds that the phenomenon of forced marriage is not a social problem, but a form of inter-generational conflict over marriage when society develops to a certain stage. It is a kind of ‘Chinese marriage anxiety.’”⁷² Zhang Wei notes that the number of single young people of a marriageable age is rising: “Between 1997 and 2005, the proportion of unmarried women aged 30–34 rose sharply, and the increased incidence of unmarried older people began to attract attention.” This phenomenon was all the more striking in large metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai. The numbers of older unmarried men and women were enormous.⁷³ Zhang Wei finds that the prospect of being “left on the shelf” causes considerable marriage anxiety in young people, and that this

anxiety is appearing at an ever earlier age. “Women’s anxiety over marriage is more pronounced,” he writes.⁷⁴ He finds that behind this marriage anxiety lie a number of factors, including demographics, personal finances, social views, modes of social interaction, and family pressure. Another phenomenon, related to the pressure to marry and the fear of being left on the shelf, is the flourishing market in parental attempts to arrange marriages. Sun Peidong studies matchmaking activities and “white-haired dating” and finds a level of “shared anxiety” among the parents of young adults in the cities.⁷⁵

Many studies have found that young people’s modes of dating and marriage are shifting away from traditional ideas. Liu Shuang and Liang Haiyan surveyed women of three generations and found that the ages of marriage are changing. The traditional model of the man being older than the women is becoming much less common, and there has been a very significant rise in marriages in which the female partner is older. The causes may be related to China’s persistent imbalance in male/female births, and to changing conceptions of marriage.⁷⁶ Zhang Wei finds an increase in very fast marriages and fast divorces, but also a rise in cohabitation as young people experiment more to find the perfect partner. Zhang also finds that financial factors are increasing in importance: young people are often forced to demand notarized evidence of financial assets from potential partners as a way of offsetting the risks of marriage.⁷⁷ Wang Jinxin finds empirical evidence that contemporary young people are more open-minded about sex. A survey of 4,565 young people from across the country, ages 17–25, reveals the following attitudes: respect for individual rights; positive views of the value of sex; pursuit of sexual, romantic, and marital compatibility in the same person; and an increasing diversity of views on sex.

Increasing open-mindedness means increasing acceptance among young people of traditionally taboo behavior (e.g., adultery, sex before marriage, homosexuality). These alternative sexual behaviors have also been the subject of study by youth researchers.⁷⁸ Wang Yiyi’s qualitative research explores the motivations for “lavender marriages” between gay men and women.⁷⁹ Her research finds that gay men and women have complex reasons for entering into these arrangements, including the desire to please family, individual reasons, pragmatic reasons, and idealistic reasons. None of these explanations were independently sufficient to describe the lives of her interviewees. Wang finds that “lavender marriages between gay men and women cannot be simply described as a compromise with traditional values. On the contrary, in their marriage practices and strategies we can see how they are actively mediating the contra-

dictions and conflicts among family, individuals, and society. They use strategies to expand their own living space, including finding relationship modes and lifestyles that work for them.”⁸⁰ Jing Jun, Wang Chenyang, and Zhang Yuping also find a clash between homosexual behavior and traditional views in their study on coming out: “In a society that strongly excludes minority groups, there is a conflict between the gay identity and their sense of duty to their family. Through this lens, we can see the extreme fear among gay people and their families of discrimination, marginalization, or even victimization. The Chinese gay community still needs to go through a politicized process of linking sexual rights with civil rights and sustained anti-discrimination efforts.”⁸¹ Guo Xiaofei comes to a rather different conclusion. He finds that in some ways, Chinese society and the Chinese public could be relatively accepting of gay marriage. His study into the marriage rights of transsexual people finds that “the success of transsexual marriage was neither contested nor feted. There was no legal advocacy by transsexual groups, no debate or hearings in the legislature, no milestone cases in the courts. . . . Already there are voices saying that the acceptance of transsexual marriage is an indirect affirmation of gay marriage. . . . But the issue does not appear to be causing much worry. . . . In mainland China, the religious opposition to gay marriage is not as strong as in the West. China’s fundamentalist Christian forces and their defense of traditional marriage and ‘one man, one woman’ purity simply do not have the power to mobilize opinion.”⁸²

Despite the drift away from traditional views of love and marriage, young people still retain some fairly traditional views on the subject of having children. Zhang Liang compares international data on childless women with survey data in China and compares attitudes toward childlessness in China to developed countries. He finds that lifelong childlessness among Chinese couples remains at an extremely low level. There has been no progressive increase in the number of DINK (double income no kids) households.⁸³

Other youth researchers have looked at how demographics are affecting dating and marriage among young people in the countryside. In particular, these researchers have investigated how the gender imbalance and large shifts in population are making marriage much more difficult for young men. Jin Xiaoyi, Li Chenghua, and Li Yan compared data from a survey of rural residents working in the cities and the rural workforce censuses carried out in the 1980s. They compared how the gender imbalance was affecting marriage strategies and marriage quality by analyzing gender, birth cohort, stayers/leavers,

and different regions. They find that the oversupply of men is starting to have an effect on men's marriages, in that the quality of men's marriages has significantly decreased. Outward migration was having a mixed impact, and the size of the region where surplus males is causing worse marriages is increasing.⁸⁴ Zhang Qunlin and Yang Bo conducted a survey of the reproductive health and home lives of adult men in rural areas and found that unmarried men desperately want to get married but cannot find a partner. They face enormous pressure from their families and feelings of loneliness. Marital status and age are two critical factors in sexual activity, so poverty not only excludes these older men from marriage, it also excludes them from a sex life.⁸⁵

Authors such as Xing Chengju, Tao Ziqiang, Li Yan, Li Weidong, and Li Shuzhuo have conducted research specifically on single men in rural villages.⁸⁶ Xing Chengju finds that "the gender imbalance and increasing migration out of the villages have caused a serious imbalance in the rural marriage markets" and that this is the main cause of the increasing number of single men in rural China. However, there are also very important geographical factors.⁸⁷ Tao Ziqiang proposes the concept of "family slavery" to explain the rise of single men in the villages.⁸⁸ He finds "competition between brothers for a family's limited resources and the deprivation of opportunities" are two of the causes of singleness. "In families with multiple brothers, the eldest brother is supposed to take on the role of head of the household. This ethical constraint prevents eldest sons from leaving the village to find work, and thus cuts them off from financial resources and opportunities to meet women. They end up as rural single men."⁸⁹ Li Yan, Li Weidong, and Li Shuzhuo find that "the inheritance system means that younger sons in rural families are repeatedly deprived of marriage opportunities and opportunities to improve themselves."⁹⁰ Moreover, this unfairness is legitimized at every stage by local customary practice. Therefore, the single men themselves and other social groups tend to accept it."⁹¹

The areas that have been sketched out here are topics that have attracted the most attention from youth researchers in the last few years and are the areas in which progress has been relatively quick, with in-depth analyses. Large volumes of work have also been published on issues relating to only children and on the values and political views of young people. Overall, the field has become more of an academic discipline over the past ten years; the research skills of scholars have improved, and analyses have deepened. However, in comparison with other areas of sociology, China's youth studies still have room for improvement in terms of academic rigor and analytic depth. The work published to

date tends to fall into one of two camps: there is some work of rigor and depth, but it tends to lack a distinctive youth studies approach; meanwhile, academic work that focuses specifically on young people often lacks either analytic depth or the necessary rigor. This issue is particularly prevalent in the country's two leading youth studies journals: *Youth Research* and *China Youth Study*. *Youth Research* tends to carry papers that fall into the first category, while *China Youth Study* falls into the second. The key issue for the field is how to raise academic standards while maintaining a distinctive youth studies approach.