



Reckoning with Chinese Gen Y

By Nandani Lynton and Kirsten Høgh Thøgersen

Despite surface appearances, China's Generation Y is not becoming Western argue **Nandani Lynton and Kirsten Høgh Thøgersen.**

Visit a Chinese city today and you would assume that China is Westernising. Young people sit in Starbucks drinking lattes, texting friends, and playing online games. However, don't be fooled. In China, 240 million young people are certainly modernising, but they're also holding tight to Chinese values like responsibility for the extended family, adherence to the middle way or harmony, and care of relationships. Despite surface appearances, China's Generation Y is not becoming Western.

Generation Y (Gen Y) most commonly refers to the demographic cohort born in the 1980s to mid-'90s. Gen Yers are generally assumed to be reliant on new media and digital technology, have short attention spans, and demand entertaining and fast-paced information. Chinese refer to the post-1980 generation as clearly distinct from the post-'90 group. Accordingly we have focused on those born in the 1980s but use the global term "Gen Y."

Understanding Gen Yers is important because they make up almost 50 per cent of China's workforce. As they have moved from school into jobs, the leadership of organisations working in China have noticed that this set makes different demands and needs to be motivated in new ways. So we began to research what Gen Y values, and what its members expect from their

careers and their lives. Our work is based on interviews and surveys of Gen Y Chinese and Westerners who have lived, studied, and/or worked abroad. These are urban youth, well-educated and with work experience. Altogether we had almost 200 data points.

A GLOBAL CULTURE?

While it might seem that we are experiencing global cultural convergence, it's important to take a deeper look. Young people everywhere use the same technology and wear similar clothes. But some similarities are superficial. Look beneath the surface image of Asians playing the same games as Westerners, and you will still see recognisably different cultural patterns. Chinese are among the highest users of online games, for instance, but even when they play through avatars and artificial names, experts can easily identify them as Chinese by their behaviour online.

Our evidence suggests these international cultural artefacts, such as video games and skinny decaf lattes, are the currency of modern culture. Like the pidgin languages developed by early traders to make communication possible across regions, the artefacts have common usage but do not deeply change either side. In the urban Chinese Gen Y, we see this clearly. While their behaviour is modern, their values and patterns remain deeply Chinese.



COMMUNITY COMMENT

Mark Wilson, General Manager (North), British Sugar Overseas China

Western managers operating in China must understand and de-code the differences between themselves and local people; they must also understand the differences between Chinese Gen Yers and other Chinese generations. They must adapt their management style accordingly rather than be seduced into believing that this group think like Westerners just because they are drinking a Starbuck's coffee or went to University in the UK or the US. They must understand that whilst "fast-track" Chinese Gen Yers can seemingly get on-board quickly with Western ideas, they often find it hard to influence their elder Chinese colleagues in senior management positions. Specific interventions should be developed to overcome these blockages which involve intermediaries and private meetings however, when doing so it is important to avoid words like 'coach' or 'mentor' as these can have negative connotations as there are no direct translations.

So what are traditional Chinese values? Ancient Chinese philosophers, writers over centuries, and modern cultural experts agree on the core themes. This has been confirmed by our work over the last 15 years with groups of Chinese managers, asking them to define "Chinese-ness". According to all these sources, traditional Chinese values focus on family, relationships, achievement, endurance, and sacrifice of one's self for the group. They also include the ideal of the golden mean or harmony, and hierarchy as the basis for social structure and interaction.

Gen-Y Chinese have high expectations for their careers and expect to work diligently to achieve these. However, despite their popular image as the "Me Generation," we find that they hold up traditional family values. Asked, "What is really important to you?" 45 per cent said, "family," with "friends" following at 17 per cent and "career" at 12 per cent. Gen Y feels keenly responsible for both their nuclear family and their grandparents, even for aunts and uncles. They feel responsible despite the fact that there is little personal communication; most say they cannot ask about details of family history or discuss personal subjects with their elders.

We also asked young Chinese to choose one wish that would make their life happier. Surprisingly, 82 per cent chose to do something for their parents, most commonly to provide them an easy life. A typical

answer was, "I would be instantly happy if my parents could have a beautiful house so they could feel really good." We then asked a follow-up, "And if you already had that, then what might your second wish be?" One answered in a flash, "I would like my parents to also have a fish pond in their garden."

The desire for harmony is exhibited in how the Chinese respondents describe their personality characteristics. Western respondents describe themselves in polar terms, while 46 per cent of the Chinese presented themselves as seeking balance. When put into new environments, Chinese Gen Ys emphasise the development of new friendships while Western respondents focus almost entirely on the new aspects of a novel environment and the emotions arising from the experience. Chinese have higher interdependency; it is part of their cultural pattern emphasising relationships and groups rather than individualism.

The single most surprising result of our research is that 70 per cent of the young Chinese consider themselves spiritual, while only half the Westerners do so. Many Chinese respondents answered, "I don't have a religion but I believe in a universal power." More important, almost every Chinese interviewed used the word "destiny" in talking about their spirituality, regardless of whether they claimed adherence to a particular religion.

The evidence indicates that it is smart for the Chinese government to allow the expression of spiritual feelings in these channelled ways because the young generation needs it.

THE IMPACT OF GEN Y

Our research reveals that Gen Yers remain deeply Chinese in their values and perceptions. They do not look like their grandparents, but their motivations and priorities are very similar. Chinese Gen Ys modernise, they do not Westernise.

Our research results show that Gen Y is the first group in China to question one of these core values seriously, as they challenge the pre-eminence of hierarchy. While they take for granted that hierarchy exists, Gen Yers are less willing than earlier generations to accept it. Hence some of the issues that employers raise about their young staff, "How do we get good results from someone who won't do what we say?"; "How do we win their loyalty?"; "Why don't they trust us?" These difficult questions demonstrate the area in which Gen Yers are least like their parents: unquestioning acceptance of hierarchy and authority.

THE NETWORK
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For many Western China-watchers, it has been a question of when, rather than if, the Chinese young will claim the right to personal freedom in the wake of economic growth. Looking closely at the Chinese Gen Ys makes us wonder whether this assumption makes sense. Chinese Gen Ys want to keep their society built on collective harmony and effective relationship management. At the same time, their refusal to accept authority unquestioningly indicates a new level of critical thinking.

This combination is already causing difficulty in the workplace illustrating the inherent dilemma between maintaining harmony and questioning authority. Chinese culture is strong, and when these 240 million Chinese Gen Yers come into power we may see a progressive new face of this traditional society, but they will have to face the modern dilemma they are creating.

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Nandani Lynton
Adjunct Professor of
Management, The Euro-China
Centre for Leadership and
Responsibility (ECLLAR)

Nandani is faculty at the Euro-China Centre for Leadership and Responsibility at the China Europe International Business School in Shanghai. With more than two decades of international experience in the private and public sectors, Lynton focuses on developing effective leadership in global organisations.



Kirsten Høgh Thøgersen
Professor, Sun Yat-Sen University

Kirsten is a professor at Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou and currently a visiting scholar at CEIBS. A Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Aarhus, she has worked in international clinics in Beijing and Brussels for 20 years while running a private counselling practice.

Contact the authors through www.criticaleye.net