

Generations in China

by [Tammy Erickson](#)

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Many thanks to all who joined the discussion several weeks ago regarding generations in India. I hope those of you who grew up in China will share your formative experiences and the resultant conceptual models that influence your view of today's world. Let me offer an initial overview, based on my research.

Individuals born from about 1928 to 1945 (Traditionalists)

In the 1940's and 1950's, while teens in India were living through the advent of the independent Indian state and those in the U.S. were experiencing the birth of the consumer economy, teens in China were also living through a major transition. The second Sino-Japanese War, the largest Asian war in the twentieth century, ended, ending the 14-year-long Japanese invasion. In its wake, civil war raged between the Nationalist and Communist parties. In 1949, Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist Party fled to Taiwan and, on October 1, the Communists established the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland.

Communist leader Mao Zedong initiated major economic reforms — a socialist “Big Push” to industrialize China, replacing landlord ownership and peasant workers with the development of heavy industry and the construction of new factories. Throughout the 1950's, Mao's campaigns to suppress former landlords and capitalists intensified; foreign investment in the country essentially ended. In 1958, Mao launched a new initiative, the “Great Leap Forward” — an unprecedented process of collectivization in rural areas: the

formation of communes, the abolition of private plots, and the creation of a massive auxiliary network of small-scale industries, such as backyard iron smelters to produce steel — all designed to shift the nation from an agrarian to industrial economy. Agricultural output plunged, resulting in widespread malnutrition. By 1960, the country was in the throes of an economic and humanitarian disaster; 30 million people perished.

For teens coming of age during these years, it was a time of conflict and confusion as traditional ways of life were uprooted in pursuit of modernization. Hard physical work and poverty was a fact of life for most. This generation learned that affiliating with the “right” people was essential for survival, advice they undoubtedly offered to their children.

Individuals born from about 1946 to 1960/1964 (Boomers)

The 1960’s and 1970’s were the years of the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution. Under Mao’s socialist orthodoxy, both traditional Chinese and Western culture were repressed, social institutions collapsed, schools were abolished, public transportation came to a nearly complete halt, temples and churches were vandalized, and “liberal bourgeoisie” and intellectuals purged. Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated, ending Soviet technical assistance and further isolating the country. Living conditions remained extremely difficult.

Unlike teens in the United States and in India who formed cynical views of authority based on the corruption they saw in their leaders, teens in China were a major force within the Cult of Mao. With no schools to attend, they joined the Red Guards and gained whatever knowledge they had from the Chairman’s *Little Red Book*. Many demonstrated in support of Mao and joined in terrorizing ordinary citizens. Members of this generation in China grew up with the belief that loyalty to the state and institutions would be rewarded, questioning authority was unacceptable, education was unnecessary, and anything “foreign” or “old fashioned” was unwanted. They were dedicated to a single way — “the” way of doing things.

After Mao's death in 1976, the Cult of Mao rapidly devolved, leaving many in this generation — now young adults — disillusioned, uneducated, and angry at their sudden oust from power. Today this generation is known in China as the “Lost Generation,” since, without any formal education, many of its members are ill prepared to participate in the modern world.

Generation X – Individuals born from about 1961/1965 to 1979

Growing up in the post-Mao 70's and 80's, years, teen X'ers in China grew up during the period of Economic Reforms and Openness, similar to the reforms underway in India at the same time: de-collectivization of the countryside, decentralization of government, and legalization of private ownership. Special Economic Zones were created to encourage capitalist investment. Reforms included the development of a diversified banking system and stock markets. The consumer and export sectors developed rapidly. By the mid-1980s, living standards, life expectancies, literacy rates, and total grain output were up and an urban middle class was growing. X'ers became the first generation in China to come of age in a consumer society.

This generation of teens in China also grew up with more personal rights and freedoms than the previous two generations. By 1980, Deng Xiaoping had maneuvered to the top of China's leadership. There was a renaissance of traditional Chinese culture; local religions including Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism flourished. Beginning in the late 1980s, mainland China was exposed to many Western elements: pop culture, American cinema, nightlife, American brands, and Western teen slang. China developed a strong cell phone culture, and soon had the most mobile users in the world.

Despite the economic and cultural progress, the country remained a totalitarian state. Liberals protested Deng's unrelenting stance on the political front. In 1989, the Tiananmen Square protests resulted in China's government being condemned internationally.

For this generation, the flood of new information, academic opportunities, and world knowledge was highly appealing and shaped a life-long inclination toward learning from multiple sources. Economic opportunity, including a growing consumer market, was available for those who studied and worked hard. Members balanced between the reinvigoration of China's cultural heritage and exploration of opportunities in the West. Not naturally Western-savvy, X'ers developed with a mental model that was highly pragmatic and facts-based.

Generation Y – Individuals born from 1980 to 1995

Around the world, Generation Y teens shared many common experiences. As in India and the U.S., teens in China were swept up in a booming economy. Although foreign trade embargoes from Tiananmen were in place, economic growth in China continued at a fast pace during the 1990's and early 2000's. Reforms continued, including the sale of equity in China's largest state banks to foreign investors and refinements in foreign exchange and bond markets. In 2004, the National People's Congress provided protection for private property rights and placed new emphasis on reducing some of the disadvantage of industrial growth, including regional unemployment, unequal income distribution between urban and rural regions, and environmental pollution. The country made significant investments made in science, technology and space exploration. Thousands moved from rural villages to cities, farms to factories, leaving behind family, class and history. By 2007, most of China's growth was coming from the private sector. Throughout this period, China has gradually become more open and less repressive – not a democracy, but also no longer a totalitarian state.

Nicknamed the “Litter Emperors,” Gen Y's in China occupy a special role in the burgeoning society. China's one child policy, introduced in 1979, means that most members of this generation are only children, in many instances reared as the sole focus of two parents and four doting grandparents. They tend to have high self esteem and a level of confidence that positions them for leadership roles in China and globally.

Like many Y's around the world, this generation has strong advanced technological skills and an urge to be connected globally. Even as teens, they confidently communicate directly with outside world leadership and influence the future of their country. During the 2008 Tibetan unrest which marked the 49th anniversary of the failed 1959 Tibetan uprising against Beijing's rule, young patriotic Chinese waged Internet campaigns against Western media coverage of the protests. Also in 2008, when a massive earthquake killed 70,000, many young people participated in the rescue as volunteers.

Teen Y's in China have experienced a wave of national pride. Two foreign colonies were returned to China during their teen years: Hong Kong from Britain in 1997 and Macau from Portugal in 1999. In 2001, China was admitted into the World Trade Organization. Most significantly, in 2008, China successfully hosted the 2008 Summer Olympics.

As in India, Y's in China share this generation's global sense of immediacy, coupled with the excitement of being part of the country's first wave of broad economic opportunity and growing national pride. Y's in China are confident and competitive. For many, a desire for economic success is closely coupled with a desire for status. They are looking forward, toward increasing China's role and influence in the world.

As we look ahead to future generations, the one child policy was re-evaluated in 2008 and extended for at least another decade, insuring that the next generation will also be comprised largely of single children.

China, like other countries I'll discuss over the upcoming weeks, illustrates the dramatically different experiences and formative events that influenced those growing up in the 1940's – 1970's (the generations that I call Traditionalists and Boomers in the United States), and the growing similarity of experiences in the 1980's onward. Generations X and Y are the beginnings of global generations.

Now I'd love to hear from you — particularly if you grew up in China. What events were most memorable and influential during your teen years? What characteristics influence the way you view the world today?

If you'd like to understand more about generational traits and the implications for you as a leader, I hope you'll explore Harvard Corporate Learning's new online program based on my work: "Leading Across the Ages." In this difficult economy, it's a great way to share insights broadly within your organization — to reduce intergenerational tensions, strengthen relationships among your colleagues, and increase productivity and the likelihood of innovation. I hope you'll check it out!

Tamara J. Erickson has authored the books *Retire Retirement*, *Plugged In*, and *What's Next, Gen X?* She is the author or co-author of five Harvard Business Review articles and the book *Workforce Crisis*. Erickson was named one of the top 50 global business thinkers for 2011.

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