

Generation Gap and Family Conflict in Chinese Families: A Theoretical Perspective

Peiyuan Hong

*International Department, Xiamen University, Xiamen, China
782557356@qq.com*

Abstract. Family conflicts in China, due to differences in culture, structure and economy, have had a serious negative impact on the mental health of teenagers, their behaviour, study, etc. Intergenerational differences are one of the main reasons. The older generation is more inclined to have stable jobs, and the younger generation wants to be entrepreneurs or work for themselves. There will be various ideological differences among the people, and they will argue frequently. Rapid changes in society's economy and culture since the reform and opening up have altered the living level and values of the public, and the spread of the Internet and entertainment culture have increased the gap in understanding between teenagers and their parents. Confucianism traditionally promotes the rule of elders and family unity, but today's young people are more independent and desire self-expression. It will have different expressions in the psychological and educational fields. Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecological systems shows that the social, cultural and economic environment affects family life, but there are no specific intervention plans. In short, the causes of family conflicts in China are different values among generations, rapid changes in society and the complex integration of cultural norms. There is a demand for context-sensitive psychological and socio-cultural interventions to address the problem of intergenerational conflict and build a harmonious family.

Keywords: Family Conflict, Generation, Education, Psychological Counseling, Parenting

1. Introduction

Chinese families exhibit diverse cultures, family structures, and economic statuses, all of which can give rise to various types of family conflicts. Family conflicts, such as disagreements between parents, can have a profound impact on mental health, social interactions, academic performance, and behavior [1]. According to the Report on National Mental Health Development in China, data reveal that over 18% of Chinese adolescents aged 12-18 experience considerable family-related stress, with a higher percentage (25%) in urban areas. The same report shows that mental health issues among adolescents are increasing, with over 20% reporting feelings of sadness and hopelessness, which often relate to family dynamics and conflicts [2].

One of the reasons that is worth considering is the generation gap. In the past decades, China has dramatically changed from living standards to social atmosphere, and this change is rare even worldwide [3]. However, it also causes more severe generational gaps. For example, the elder

generation (such as those in the 70s or 80s) would prefer to choose a stable job, such as a nation-state-owned enterprise. At the same time, young people are more inclined towards entrepreneurship and freelancing. The difference in mind would gradually become a conflict when making decisions [4]. In the family aspect, the conflict could become an oral fight, trauma, and even mental disease [5]. In this circumstance, solving the problem caused by concept conflict due to the generation gap could effectively help to build a bridge between the elders and teenagers in the family context.

This research will first review the existing literature on generation and social background, and then analyze the relationship between the generation gap and family conflict in China, based on this review.

2. Particularity of the Chinese family from the effects of social background and cultural background

Since the Reform and Opening-up, China's successes have been clearly evident in its economic growth, living standards, education, and other areas over the past 40 years. Most people living today have experienced the transition from extreme poverty to a moderately prosperous life or affluence. In the 1960s, the standard of a good life was owning a bicycle, a watch, and a sewing machine; in the 1980s, it shifted to home appliances like a refrigerator, a washing machine, and a television. Until now, in city families, cars and various types of home appliances are not uncommon in a typical family. Especially in post-pandemic era, industrial and social change become even more faster since the impact of COVID, for example, The "Blue Book on Teenagers: Report on Internet Use by Chinese Minors (2024)" released on September 12, 2024 [6], shows that the internet penetration rate among Chinese minors is nearly saturated, with 99.9% of minors having accessed the internet in the past six months, far exceeding the national internet penetration rate of 77.5%. Among them, the proportions of minors choosing gaming, online chatting, online learning, and leisure and entertainment as their main purposes for internet use are the highest, at 33.2%, 34.3%, 46.4%, and 65.3% respectively [7]. The trend of minors' entertainment-oriented internet use is evident. These phenomena do not only occur in children, but also in teenagers and older adults.

Confucianism is a very important part of the culture in China, so when talking about Chinese families, it is a necessary topic. This idea is the ethics of family and filial piety, and it is believed that the family is the foundation of society. The harmony of the family can be shown by the education of young people and respect for elders [8]. With the development of this, it has gradually taken on the attributes of parental authority. Most parents in China make their decisions based on social status rather than the reasons for education and overlook their children's own wishes [9]. The idea of education is not the same as in the West; it emphasises respecting one's own will and thinking critically [10].

Chinese families tend to pay more attention to the social level and have a strong hierarchical concept; this has spread to all parts of family life. With the development of internet culture and changes in society, it can be seen that family conflicts in China are no longer merely domestic problems but rather must be dealt with in light of the corresponding changes in social and cultural environments.

3. Existing research on the family generation gap and critiques in the Chinese society context

William Strauss and Neil Howe put forward the idea of a generation in 1991 [11]. Through further study, generations have been divided into the following groups: Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1996) and Generation Z (1997-2012) [12].

The Baby Boomers have been growing up during a time of economic development, social change and technological progress. Generation X has been growing up in a time of economic uncertainty, cultural change and the start of the Internet. Millennials are also known as Generation Y, and generally have an open mind, are technologically proficient, and seek social change. Generation Z is very connected and lives in the virtual world. However, the theory has been widely applied to many studies in recent years and criticised. This theory cannot resolve the problem of differences between generations at their roots [12]. Most directly, there were no other baby boomers with the same length of time. In addition, the number of people in Generation Z in different countries may vary over time even in the same region due to differences in economic conditions and openness to new ideas.

Categorisation is used in the generational study of China. It is often seen in daily life, but there has been little research on the differences in generational theory and Chinese people's customs. For example, people born in the 2000s are commonly called 'post-00s', and every 10 years, or even every 5 years, it will be another gap to divide the crowd of people. The main reason for this is China's rapid development, which has affected the generation divide to a certain extent in the macro environment and shown up in many significant events in Chinese society. For instance, Yeling mentioned in "How the WTO Changed China" that there have been many changes in China's economy and some significant reform efforts since the establishment of the WTO [13]. The generation that grew up before this event was under the planned economy and the initial reform period of China, whereas those who came of age later witnessed China's deepening integration into the world economy and saw changes in their work and life.

4. The evaluation of Chinese family conflict from a cross-generational aspect through theories

4.1. Micro analysis on the impact of the generation gap on the social environment aspect

Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory can explain the particularity of the Chinese generation in the context of family conflict. It introduces three core systems that have the capability for analysis: mesosystems refer to interactions between the family and other settings, such as school and community. Ecosystems refer to the impact of parents' work and social networks on the family. Macrosystems refer to the environmental effects from broader social culture background, values, and social systems [5, 14].

Families are important parts of the microsystems of children; the concept of parents, atmosphere, and relationships directly affects the development of children, while the macrosystem, for example, the economic environment, directly affects the resources that a family can mobilize for their children. For example, parents who worked in the trade industry around 2001 could relate to it [13], which may give them a more open perspective compared to parents who worked in the previous era.

In this perspective, family conflict would be viewed from different perspectives that form across generations in society. Although, as referred to, parents who worked around the time China joined the WTO would be more open, they have their limitations in contemporaneity since they did not experience the rapid development of the internet society in China. Problems related to their children, such as internet addiction, have proliferated since the internet entered China [15]. Consequently, Chinese parents have no effective way to address these issues according to traditional Confucian concepts, as well as the failure of interaction between the macro and micro systems. What needs to be noticed is that Bronfenbrenner's framework does not provide concrete strategies for responding to cultural crises, such as the tension between traditional parental authority and the younger generation's individualistic aspirations. As such, while the theory sheds light on how external forces

shape family interactions, it does not offer sufficient tools to evaluate the cultural conflict from the past views to modern society in Chinese families [14].

Nevertheless, the shift in Chinese society has had a more dramatic effect in the post-pandemic years. By 2022, the number of empty-nest families had exceeded 200 million, accounting for approximately 35% of all families, and this shift reflects the decline of the traditional family model [16]. According to the 2021 China Social Psychological Development Report, over 60% of young people reported feeling anxious, with approximately 40% attributing their anxiety to the high expectations and career pressures placed on them by their parents [17]. These data showed that family conflict had evolved into a more complex circumstance. More dramatic social competition and the tendency towards change in family structure had pushed parents into a helpless situation with their generational concept.

Confucianism holds that there is a hierarchy in the family, and parents are considered the "nurturers" and "guides" of their children. The role of parents is to maintain the stability of the family, and their authority is generally accepted without question. Parents' opinions on the education, career path and marriage of their children are rooted in tradition. In this culture, success is often regarded as high grades in school, good jobs and social honour. Careers in law, medicine and engineering are relatively high-demand, whereas the arts and entrepreneurship are often considered to have fewer advantages and thus less popular. Parents tend to think that these career choices are indicators of a person's social status and economic stability, thus conforming to Confucian ideals of order and family honour. However, the norm has changed since most children have been more anxious, and this difference will finally lead to a clash of ideas.

For example, take a young couple who were getting married around the beginning of the 2000s. Due to the constraints of their time, they may have believed that their success was due to their own potential rather than being the result of changes in society and the economy at that time. Under the influence of Confucianism, they may want their children to be as successful as they were, thus believing that success is not only for themselves but also related to the honour of their family and society. The deep-seated view of hierarchical achievement may influence their attitude towards raising children, and they hope that their children will also be successful in this way.

However, as their children grow up, they realize that the competitive landscape has undergone radical changes. The educational system, the job market, and societal values have all evolved in ways their parents did not experience or anticipate. What was once considered a clear path to success in the early 2000s no longer holds the same promise. The intense pressure to excel in increasingly competitive environments, from primary school to university and later to employment, has become more pronounced, and the societal context is vastly different from what their parents faced.

Parents who have not been able to adapt to the rapid changes in society may even suffer from social decline. As a result, they are gradually losing the conviction that success is determined by one's own ability and not by external circumstances. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory [5, 14], this failure to adjust to changes in life will probably lead the parents to exert even more pressure on their children in an effort to restore or maintain their sense of social status. The parents' old-fashioned ideas about their children do not match the children's actual situations, so there is a family conflict due to the difference between generations; consequently, disagreements arise over what constitutes success and changes in society.

4.2. Micro analysis on the impact of the generation gap from psychology and pedagogy aspects

Baumrind [1] put forward a model of parenting styles, and the authoritarian style is often considered to be in line with traditional Chinese parenting. Autocratic style is rooted in the cultural background of history, and it demands that children be obediently follow all rules without showing emotions. According to the tradition of Chinese culture, this style is in line with Confucian ideals of respect for elders, order, and family. Authoritarian parents have strict behaviour standards and control their children's lives in a very restrictive way. Dictates the person's daily life, career and other matters. Authoritarian parents are unlikely to give their children the freedom to express their thoughts, emotions and ideas, so they are not allowed to make choices independently or think critically.

Although the authoritarian parenting style is still common in China's traditional families, many young people nowadays do not agree with it. The reason is that children's understanding and feeling of their parents are weakening. As children form their sense of self, especially during the important stages of adolescence and young adulthood, their thinking systems begin to change and they seek freedom, self-awareness, etc. Authoritarian parenting has strict rules and restricts children's emotions; thus, it fails to meet this need. What was once a reasonable way of raising children is now strange and baffling to them as the children begin to question and explore their own ideas. Therefore, there is a conflict between the parents' traditional expectations and the children's desire for independence and self-expression.

Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development (1968) can be used to explain this friction; it is called the Identity vs. Role Confusion Stage of Children in Adolescence. At this time, children are actively seeking to establish their own sense of self and exploring their beliefs, values and aims. According to Erikson's theory, at this stage, one's development will be laid the groundwork for life after this. However, when a child's exploration of self leads them to depart from the expectations of their parents, especially in a family that values tradition, this will cause them to be at odds with their parents. As children learn new ways of thinking and living that are contrary to their parents' expectations, they may feel stifled or misunderstood, and thus exhibit emotional and behavioural rebellion.

Also, this rebellion will gradually worsen over time because the parents cannot handle the conflict well. Parents, especially in authoritarian families, may not know how to communicate their worries to their children or be emotionally flexible in response. In the event of a disagreement, the typical authoritarian way to react is to increase the strictness of the rules, close off discussion, or raise the punishment rather than communicate and seek common ground. As a result, no one has been able to resolve the problems so far and the underlying cause of the dissatisfaction has gone unnoticed. Rather than being settled, a new conflict emerges with each one, and the disagreement grows day by day.

Over time, this pattern of unaddressed tension has changed and is now a long-standing issue in which conflicts between parents and children are not minor disputes but continuous conflicts caused by misunderstanding and unmet needs. What started as a minor disagreement about curfews and study discipline has turned into a serious dispute; there has been no communication since then, and it is difficult to resolve. Continued suppression of the children's thoughts, feelings and independence is making things worse; the distance between the parents and children has grown, and trust is disappearing. The current situation is especially prominent in the context of the generational gap in many Chinese families today; that is, parents' strong adherence to traditional ideas of respect and authority conflicts with the aspirations for independence of their children in a changing society. If

these differences cannot be reconciled, there will be prolonged family discord and a closed-loop situation of disputes that is hard to break.

5. Conclusion

China has changed a lot in recent years, and both the economy and technology have advanced rapidly, leading to different values between the generations. Older generations are more likely to prefer stable jobs in state-owned enterprises, and young people are more inclined to be self-employed or freelancers; thus, there may be friction and miscommunication in the family. This intergenerational conflict is caused by people of different generations having different ideas about success, career paths, and values; thus, there are more differences in society [14].

The hierarchical family system in Confucianism has promoted respect for elders and filial piety for a long time, but this is changing with modern social development. With the development of the Internet and changes after the pandemic, family relations have been altered to some extent [16]; young people are more exposed to new life environments and are accustomed to different ways of living now. As a result, there are more intergenerational conflicts and traditional family roles are constantly changing in a new way.

Strauss and Howe [11] have carried out previous research on the generational gap to provide an outline of the diverse features of different generations, but they have not focused on the specific circumstances of China's rapid development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory can be used to study the reasons behind family conflict and see how the surrounding environment (economy, society and culture) affects the family. This framework does not provide answers to the problems of artistic and intergenerational conflicts in Chinese families today. In addition, if the theoretical model does not include cultural elements, it will have trouble being applied to address the actual problems of Chinese families.

In addition, the psychological stress and mental health problems caused by the conflict between generations are also getting worse. More than 60% of the young people are anxious, and many believe that their parents have too high expectations for them. Therefore, it is urgent to carry out good work to bridge the gap between generations and meet all the emotional and psychological demands of family members.

There will be many problems in future research that need to be solved. China's distinctive generational changes are also associated with different regions. One such phenomenon is the population attraction in Guangzhou and other cities, resulting in a large number of migrants [18]. Therefore, it is difficult to explore the nature of the generational gap in China and further complicate the problem. In addition, the conflicts in Chinese families are not solely due to generational gaps; rather, there are also complicated cultural structures and the lasting impact of different birth times in different periods. In recent years, many more problems have emerged in these families due to the rapid changes of modern China. In short, family conflict in China has become a serious problem that cannot be ignored; more research is needed urgently to help the relevant parties find effective solutions to this problem.

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