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From Balinghou to Jiulinghou, China's Millennials Come of Age

By [Robert L. Moore](#), [Zhao Chang](#), July 15, 2014, [Feature](#)

There is a timeless observation according to which younger generations never fail to rebel against their parents' values. In reality, most rising generations of youth do not overthrow the ways of their ancestors, but rather carry them forward, even teaching them to their own descendants. This is evidenced by the simple fact that, generation after generation, certain cultural beliefs and traits continue to be identified with particular regions. Today in the Middle East, for example, as in the past, the Koran continues to be revered. And in China, many of the basic precepts of Confucianism still hold sway, as they have for millennia.

On the other hand, it is true that every once in a while, a youth cohort breaks with certain established values in dramatic ways that may make the parental generation feel as though the world is crumbling into depravity and chaos. The United States saw such a generational break in the counterculture movement of the 1960s, and China has more recently experienced a similar shake-up. The balinghou generation, defined roughly as those born in 1980 or after, came of age in the 1990s, and as it did so, Chinese society began to overturn tradition in striking ways, some of which left the parents of this generation anxious and bewildered.

The balinghous grew up in a China very different from that which dominated their parents' youth. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, Mao Zedong's pervasive and heavy-handed presence shaped a world whose overriding characteristics were collectivism and obligatory self-sacrifice on behalf of society. In fact, Mao, as leader of the victorious communist revolution of 1949 (or "liberation" as it is known in China), engendered changes at least as dramatic as those that China is facing today. But Maoist-era changes were driven from the top down. The various mass movements of that time were all orchestrated by Communist Party leaders, not by restless and rebellious youth.

What happened in the 1990s, as the children of these Mao-indoctrinated parents came of age, was change driven from the bottom up by a young generation finally freed from the constraints of totalitarian political pressures. Also adding fuel to the fire were China's increasing prosperity and its new openness to the West. It is fair to say that both the government's retreat from citizens' everyday lives and the new opportunities offered by a suddenly prosperous and open China combined to make the 1990s youth movement possible.

All of this could only happen after Mao's death in 1976. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping became China's paramount leader, and he immediately initiated a program of reforms that undid the heavy-handed collectivist structures of the Mao era and opened up China to international influences. Small-scale entrepreneurship was permitted at first, but soon, what started out as enterprise on a limited scale blossomed into a massive and rapidly expanding market-driven economy. Also, for the first time, foreign visitors were encouraged. China's doors, which had been closed to the West almost as tightly as North Korea's are now, were suddenly flung open, with the result that a steadily growing influx of foreigners began to appear on Chinese soil. Finally, in the mid-1990s, the Internet became widely available in China's cities, and this opened up further avenues of communication with the West.

The balinghou youth who came of age during Deng's reform era were faced with a China utterly unlike that which their parents had known. Before Deng's reforms, every Chinese citizen was assigned to a work unit or danwei, and issued a household registration record (hukou) that determined where he or she was allowed to live. The danwei was the main institution through which the state controlled citizens' lives, keeping tabs on their

marriages, divorces, number of offspring and activities in general. With the opening up of the economy, the danwei's influence was gradually reduced until by the 1990s its control over everyday life had become negligible. The household registration system was similarly liberalized with the result that many millions of rural Chinese began to move into cities in search of improved economic prospects. The government of the People's Republic of China is still firmly in control of all major decision-making institutions, but it no longer concerns itself with the minutiae of individuals' personal lives.

The prosperity, relative freedom and influence from Western youth culture produced a new attitude among China's youth in the 1990s, and a key characteristic of this attitude was individualism. Where their parents would have been subject to intense criticism or may have even been beaten or jailed for flaunting an individualistic spirit, many balinghou youth seized on the new individualism with relish.

One example of this new mentality was evident in a Qingdao University student named Kicking Bird. In 1993, this very lively and genial young man decided to let his hair grow down to shoulder length and beyond. Such a long, flowing hairstyle was unlike anything any of his classmates dared to display. His inspiration for it was Kicking Bird, the Dakota Indian holy man in the 1990 film "Dances with Wolves." What Qingdao University's Kicking Bird admired in his Lakota namesake were his decency, wisdom and open-mindedness. But his commemoration of these personal qualities took the form of a very striking hairstyle and an attention-getting name.

Kicking Bird got into trouble with the university authorities, who tried to force him out of school, but his parents backed him up and he managed to stay on. Though his mother didn't really approve of his long hair, she, like most Chinese mothers, was above all concerned with her child's education, and when the chips were down she stood by her son.

As Kicking Bird's story suggests, one feature of intergenerational relationships that has not changed in China is that parents still involve themselves very deeply in their children's lives. Even today, Chinese parents often choose the universities to which their children apply and the academic subjects in which they major. More than Western parents, most Chinese parents take a very active and assertive role in their children's studies, particularly at the secondary school level. And, in addition to this, they will often watch closely as their adolescent and young-adult children form romantic relationships. Parents cannot legally control their children's marriages as they did in the past, but, legal constraints aside, many parents bring intense psychological pressure to bear when it comes time for a son or daughter to marry. It is not at all unusual for this pressure to result in the break-up of an affair in which both the young lovers were deeply attached to each other, but where the parents of one were adamantly opposed to the match.

Also linked to individualism was the way in which young Chinese adopted the American concept of "cool" around 1995. Since Internet cafes were springing up all over the urban landscape, China's youth could directly access not only Western websites, but also sites in Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. Through the Internet the word "ku"—the Chinese version of "cool"—was popularized. Ku, for young Chinese, carried many of the semantic features of its English counterpart, but it also included a strong emphasis on individualism, something not prominent in the Western concept of cool. In adopting this slang term of approval, young Chinese associated it with the very feature of their value system that most dramatically distinguished them from their parents.

When particularly rebellious young generations establish values starkly opposed to some of those their parents held dear, they often symbolize this break through the use of a new pervasive slang term. American youth did this in the 1920s when they threw off the constraints of their parents' Victorian values and symbolized their new ideas with the slang term "swell." It happened again in the 1960s with the birth of the counterculture and its attendant slang term, "cool." So it was for the Chinese of the balinghou generation in the 1990s. The symbol of their break from their parents was the slang term ku. For them, the individuals who most typified the ku concept were flamboyant rock stars and heroic figures from film and fiction who exhibited a strong sense of self in the face of all opposition. As this generation rises into positions of prominence and power, these individualistic

values will have a significant impact on Chinese society, though exactly what this impact will be remains to be seen.

One important way in which young Chinese today express their individualism is in dating and courtship patterns. What first replaced the old arranged marriage system, which was legally abolished in 1950, was a culture of courtship in which male-female behavior was decidedly conservative by Western standards. This courtship culture endured until the 1990s, and one of its key features was the belief that when single young men and women spent time together, going on dates, taking walks and so on, these behaviors were part of a sequence that should lead to marriage. People did not date in that era just for the fun of it. But this all began to change in the 1990s. Suddenly young people were going out together even when they knew that there was little or no chance of their getting married. The focus of the date was now on its entertainment value, including, of course, light sexual play. And, as the decade progressed, the behavior of dating couples became even bolder.

In 1999, Wei Hui's novel "Shanghai Baby" came out, and although it was banned by Chinese authorities (or perhaps because of this), it rapidly became a best seller. With unprecedented explicitness, it tells the story of a Shanghai woman's affairs with both Western and Chinese lovers. It was followed by a number of equally explicit copycat novels and, eventually by a number of female bloggers who publicized with unblushing candor their interest in casual sexual encounters. The best known of these was a woman who went by the screen name Muzimei and whose accounts of multiple love affairs and one-night stands amazed netizens and shocked both the authorities and the Confucian sensibilities of the older generations. Muzimei explicitly linked her openness about her sexuality to her belief in individual freedom and gender equality.

Muzimei's blog, which has been taken down by the authorities, made her famous in 2003, at about the time when the post-1990s generation, the *jiulinghou*, was about to come of age. The *jiulinghou* are often said to be more rebellious and outrageous in their behavior than their *balinghou* forebears. Accordingly, though Muzimei herself is more of a *balinghou*, being born in 1978, her attitude is seen by some as an indication that the younger and bolder *jiulinghou* generation has taken free-spirited individualism to places where even the post-1980s youth had never dared to go. With the new millennium, a new openness toward sexuality by some young Chinese has pushed the boundaries of acceptable behavior ever further from the restraints of traditional morality.

Another feature of the new millennium, and the *jiulinghou*, is the flourishing of reality TV shows. Particularly popular was the Beijing program "If You Are the One," which was designed to bring young couples together. A famous, or perhaps infamous, encounter occurred on this program in 2010 when a woman who was invited by a suitor to join him on a bicycle date rejected him, saying, "I would rather cry in a BMW." The proclamation attracted national attention and entered popular discourse, and the crass materialism it expressed provided fodder for endless debates and discussions about the *jiulinghou* generation.

Some observers have attributed attitudes like these to the "spoiled" nature of China's little emperors and empresses, those young people raised as only children as a result of the government's one-child-per-family policy. But in truth, the "only child" status carries as much weight as it does opportunity for being over-indulged, since these singletons are now looked at by their parents as their only hope for the future. More important factors contributing to the current materialism are the sudden prosperity after years of poverty, and the fact that China's leadership has nothing to offer its people in the way of spiritual or moral guidance. Corruption is so rife that the government is widely perceived as morally bankrupt. This perception is also contributing to a growing interest in religion among many young Chinese, and as a consequence, Christian churches in China are now seeing unprecedented rates of growth.

As in Western countries, other issues besides dating are of interest for young Chinese. Since the 1990s, the prospect of making a good deal of money has become a real possibility for many, and a consequence of this is that certain American figures have become role models for having done just this. NBA stars, for example, are extremely popular in China. Perhaps even more popular are the software tycoons Bill Gates and the late Steve Jobs, both of whom are often named by young Chinese as the people they most admire. They are looked up to as entrepreneurs who built business empires on the basis of their individual talents.

Social media has created a world in which China's youth culture has particularly flourished over the past two decades. Chat rooms, bulletin board systems and email now sustain an online youth environment in which a new language has emerged known as wanglou yuyan, or "Internet speech." Internet speech comprises a kind of youth slang that borrows from English and relies to some extent on the Roman alphabet, even in messages that are written in Mandarin. The abbreviations mm and gg, for example, refer to cute girls and appealing guys, respectively. Mm is an abbreviation for meimei, meaning little sister, which is also a term for an attractive girl. Similarly, gg refers to gege, which means big brother or "guy who would make an excellent boyfriend." Two other new youth slang terms for ideal lovers are gaofushuai for a male, which means literally "tall, rich and handsome," and baifumei or "fair, rich and beautiful," for a female.

In addition to these abbreviations, numbers are used for their phonemic values in Internet youth slang. Baba is the Mandarin pronunciation of 88 and because of this, "88" has become an Internet slang expression for "bye-bye." The number 520, pronounced wuerling, is close enough to "Wo ai ni" (I love you) to be used as code for that classic expression of endearment.

The pictographic qualities of some Chinese written words also lend themselves to playful Internet usage. A particularly widely used example is the Mandarin word jiong, which refers to a kind of plant, but which in Internet slang has a meaning entirely unrelated to its semantics. Rather, in its written form it is thought to resemble a face expressing shock or dismay, and so it is used on the Internet as though it were an emoticon suggesting these sentiments.

Politics also has a place in Chinese youth culture, though not in the same way as was the case in the 1980s, when talk of democracy was in the air. Following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing, government efforts to suppress unauthorized political discussions have been intense and fairly successful. Many young Chinese spend no time thinking about or discussing political issues other than to voice an occasional complaint about the government's "Great Firewall" or the corruption of local officials. Many of the political opinions that are expressed by youth are purely nationalistic. This is mainly a result of government policies. The Chinese government seeks to control political discourse through three main avenues: first, by promoting economic growth that serves to deflect criticism; second, by suppressing views it regards as unacceptable in all media; and, third, by encouraging a strong sense of nationalism linked to China's historical experience as a victim of foreign imperialism.

However, there is an active and innovative minority among China's youth that does not buy into the propaganda promoted by the authorities. This rebellious group, like the Civil Rights and anti-war activists of America in the 1960s, has succeeded in attracting a good deal of attention despite its minority status. They make their opinions known mainly on the web, often through roundabout wordplay and satirical metaphor. For example, the authorities use the phrase he xie ("harmonious society") to portray an ideal social condition which, in fact, can often only be attained through harsh repression of dissent. Online critics of the government have been stymied by censors, who now block the phrase "harmonious society." In order to get around this feature of the Great Firewall of China, young netizens have resorted to using a similar-sounding phrase meaning "river crab." Spinning off from this, a number of images have cropped up on the web using pictures of crabs to indirectly critique government policy.

Another protesters' metaphor is the phrase "Cao ni ma" or "Grass mud horse," which is very close in pronunciation to a common but extremely obscene insult. A stuffed animal in the form of a llama has come to represent the mythical "grass mud horse," and in one well-known web image, dissident artist Ai Weiwei is shown leaping into the air, completely nude, while holding a stuffed llama over his private parts. This image suggests the phrase "Grass mud horse covers the private parts," which is homonymous with insulting the Party Central Committee.

From their attitude and sophistication, these web protesters appear to be mainly university students and recent graduates with some exposure to Western political ideas. Their online critiques resemble a constantly changing

cat-and-mouse game with the Chinese authorities, as some of the metaphorical phrases they employ to beat the censors themselves wind up being censored. However, it would be difficult to block such common words as “river” and “crab” from the web, which probably explains why the mocking phrase that these words comprise still lives on after several years of use.

The protesting youth represent a minority against a larger background of young Chinese who are more compliant toward authority. It isn't clear that these rebels will have a long-term impact on China's political system. On the other hand, the individualistic spirit of the rising generation, along with continued interaction with the outside world and steadily rising prosperity, could help bring about significant change. And the bright, young, Internet-savvy protesters might play a constructive role in such change, given that many of them are likely to hold positions of influence in the future. In any case, their clever activism represents an ongoing indication that, short of returning to the pervasive brutality of the Mao years, China's online world is likely to include voices of protest indefinitely into the future.

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Photo: Internet cafe, Chongqing, China, Sept. 5, 2006 (photo by Flickr user Hal Dick licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic license](#)).