

A Comparison of Attitudes Towards Gender Stereotypes Between Generational Cohorts in China

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This study explores the evolution of gender roles within Chinese society, emphasizing the impact of socio-economic reforms, cultural shifts, and the role of social media on younger generations' perceptions of gender stereotypes. We conducted an online survey with 152 participants from two age groups (0-30 and 31-60 years) to assess their general attitudes towards gender stereotypes and reactions to specific gender-related scenarios. Through OLS regression, our findings showed marginal significance suggesting a slight generational shift towards more open-mindedness among younger individuals, particularly women. We acknowledge limitations in our study, such as reliance on snowball sampling and statistical insignificance, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. These findings suggest that while generational shifts are emerging, entrenched cultural norms still shape attitudes across age groups, indicating the need for sustained policy efforts for value liberalisation. Future research should use more representative samples and longitudinal designs to further examine evolving perceptions.

Keywords: Gender Stereotypes; Social Norm Changes; Generational Differences; Gender Differences

Introduction

Historically, Confucianism entrenched a patriarchal structure in the Chinese society, assigning submissive roles to women. The founding of the People's Republic of China and subsequent policies implemented by the Communist Party marked as a significant breaking point. The 1950 Marriage Law, for example, proved to be revolutionary by ushering in a new paradigm shift towards gender equality. These historical changes set the stage for questioning traditional gender roles and attitudes toward domestic attitudes¹.

Since the socio-economic reforms initiated in 1978, China has witnessed remarkable changes in its economic structure, significantly impacting gender roles within society. The reforms, which are characterized by increased urbanization and market liberalization, have widened economic opportunities for women, leading to a higher level of female participation in the workforce among younger generations.

According to the World Bank (2022), China's female labor force participation rate climbed steadily to 60.5% in 2020, reflecting a great intergenerational progress. This figure stands out even when compared with other counterparts in the developed world. Apart from increasing female presence in the economic arena, the post-reform era has also seen a gradual increase in women's political participation, reflecting a broader shift towards gender inclusivity in public life. Additionally, the socio-economic reforms have coincided with significant cultural shifts that have further influenced young women's perceptions of gen-

der roles. People find themselves in an increasingly liberal social environment where marketization, alongside the resurgence of traditional gender norms, has impacted gender relationships, with media and popular culture playing pivotal roles in reshaping public discourses on femininity and masculinity. Younger women, in navigating these changing cultural landscapes, exhibit a more open-minded approach to gender roles, leveraging social media and other platforms to voice their perspectives and advocate for gender equality.

The study of gender stereotypes in China aligns with the larger literature on post-materialism by Ronald Inglehart, which identifies the cohort effect as a key driver of inter-generational value change². The issue receives extra significance as it is posited against the background of Chinese cultural expressions on social media, which is itself a phenomenon of increasing scholarly research.

In this study, I will focus on a possible causal relationship between generational cohort and attitudes towards gender roles, using statistical methods like Ordinary Least Squares regression and t-tests to analyze variations across age groups. The study concludes that there is a marginally significant shift towards more open attitudes among younger generations, while acknowledging limitations in the research design and suggesting avenues for future policy implications to promote gender equality.

Literature Review

Existing literature has focused on the economic and social dimensions of gender role evolution in China. For example, Yang explored how economic reforms may result in unbridled optimism. While these trends may suggest steady progress, scholars like Yang has timely warned that the realities might not be as promising as wished³. Specifically, despite the noticeable increase in women's labor market involvement, there are still persistent challenges such as wage discrepancies and a lack of female representation in high-status professions. Likewise, in the political realm, Yang argues that the increased political engagement of younger women not only signifies their growing assertiveness in challenging traditional gender norms, but also underscores the further need for continued efforts to enhance women's representation and influence in political decision-making processes (ibid).

Social media platforms like Weibo, Douyin, and WeChat are crucial channels for the younger generation in China to engage in global discussions on gender equality and feminism. The digital era has led to increased access to information that challenges traditional gender norms. According to a 2020 survey by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), there are over 932 million active internet users in China, with a significant number being young people who spend a lot of time on social media⁴. The accessibility of international media and online forums has exposed Chinese youth to global gender equality movements, such as #MeToo and its Chinese counterpart, #WoYeShi. These movements have sparked widespread discussion and reflection on gender norms among the younger generation. Zeng Jing analyzed over 36,000 online articles to investigate how digital technologies influenced feminist activism within China including a mass value survey revealing the actual responses of Chinese citizens⁵. Her study identified 48 cases of sexual violence and harassment, revealing that the movement initially took root in educational institutions before spreading to other sectors. This proliferation underscores a broadening discourse on sexual harassment and violence, through rapid inter-sector diffusion facilitated by digital platforms. Despite facing stringent online censorship, activists employed ingenious counter-censorship strategies to navigate the restrictive digital landscape of China, such as using 'cache' and 'camouflage' tactics. These methods demonstrated the resilience and adaptability of the movement, contributing to sustaining and expanding discussions on gender equality. Zeng concluded a significant increase in discussions on gender-related topics on Chinese social media platforms, highlighting the #MeToo movement's international norm diffusion within China's unique socio-political context. This blend of global inspiration and local action underscores the growing engagement with and awareness of gender issues among Chinese netizens, refashioning gender as a socially and politically salient issue.

The unique leverage new media possesses in reshaping the gender discourse has attracted burgeoning academic interest and analytical scrutiny in recent years. Tang and colleagues, for example, conducted a thorough examination of youth social media usage in China⁶, emphasizing its significance as a triple platform for inspiring communication, sharing information, and engaging social interactions. They also highlighted the potential of these platforms to accommodate diverse viewpoints, which allows popular exposure to polemic gender discourses. Lindberg, on the other hand, delves deeper into practical discussions of feminism and women rights on Chinese social media⁷. She demonstrates how Chinese adolescent women use social media to increase awareness of, exchange personal stories about, and rally support for issues like sexual harassment, domestic violence, and workplace discrimination. Despite encountering substantial censorship and resistance from both societal and governmental sectors, these online platforms have evolved into public spaces where young women challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Besides shaping domestic discourse, the open nature of social media renders it a crucial platform for increasing exposure to global feminist ideas, peer engagement on gender-related issues, thus inspiring more like-minded believers to solve an otherwise intractable collective action problem and form a united front. Despite the strict regulatory environment, the ongoing discussion of gender on these platforms indicates a shift in attitudes towards gender equality among younger generations. Young women, who are actively involved in online feminist movements and frequently take on leadership roles, are breaking away from traditional gender stereotypes. This is in contrast to the older generation's more conservative views, which may have been shaped by historical, social, and political factors that prioritized social stability and traditional values over individual rights and gender equality. Their use of social media not only gives them a platform for expressing their views and activism, but also exposes them to a wider range of ideas and perspectives that challenge traditional gender norms. Therefore, the attitudinal change in perception of gender roles and constantly changing evaluation criteria confirm the "post-materialism" hypothesis proposed by Inglehart. The successive liberalisation of social values represents a cohort replacement effect, with more open-minded, expression-oriented youngsters replacing their survival-oriented, more conservative generational predecessors. As such, the results obtained in the current research can be fruitfully interpreted alongside the arguably more substantive post-materialism literature, lending empirical support for latter's theoretical predictions in a country not conventionally considered in Inglehart's original data set.

Despite the insights proffered by existing studies, there is a general lack of approaches that focus on eliciting people's direct responses to culturally relevant scenarios involving gender roles. This study aims to remedy this gap by using survey-based methods that capture direct attitudes towards specific gender-related

situations, thereby contributing to our understanding of generational shifts in gender stereotype perceptions in contemporary China.

Methods

Participants

Our study is rooted in the Chinese population and we recruited 152 participants. We employed snowball sampling for participant recruitment, initiating the distribution process through WeChat moments and extending through the voluntary efforts of several distributors. Participants were divided into two discrete age groups based on social generation definition of 15 years based on The ABC of XYZ⁸. In our study, we doubled the age range for each group to encompass two social generations. By doubling the standard generational span from 15 to 30 years, we aimed to encompass two social generations within each group, thereby broadening our sample and enhancing the diversity of perspectives captured. Group 1 included individuals aged 0-30 years, while Group 2 included those aged 31-60 years. Our participant pool comprised a total of 152 individuals, with a gender distribution of 63 males (41.4%) and 89 females (58.6%). This gender distribution is critical for understanding the nuanced perspectives within our study, especially when analyzing attitudes towards gender stereotypes across different generations.

Procedure and Materials

The survey was designed using "Wenjuanxing," the largest Chinese online survey platform widely adopted in anonymous mass value survey studies, and consisted of two main sections. The first section aimed to gauge general attitudes toward gender stereotypes through a series of statements, employing a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree) for responses, and the measurement was developed from the original scale by Arjun Sekhar Pm and Parameswari Jayaraman⁹. The second section presented participants with specific scenarios related to gender stereotypes, followed by multiple-choice questions that further explored their attitudes in contextualized situations.

In the survey, responses were structured using a multiple-choice format, rated on a scale from 1 to 5, where a rating of 1 meant absolute opposition and a rating of 5 represents absolute tolerance. This scale allowed participants to accurately indicate their attitude on a series of statements. The first section of the survey was designed to measuring general attitudes, with response options that included "Strongly Disagree," "Disagree," "Neutral," "Agree," and "Strongly Agree." The objective was to evaluate participants' general attitude toward the gender stereotypical statements. The second section was designed to assess participants' attitudes towards specific scenarios. These sce-

narios were presented in statement form and were followed by multiple-choice options similar to the style of the first section. This approach provided a detailed understanding of how participants might react to particular situations, providing insights into their specific attitudes as influenced by the context of each scenario. good

Example Question for section 1:

Women are responsible for raising children.
女性有抚养孩子的责任

Example question for section 2: You are a husband whose wife has recently become pregnant. You are discussing with her the need for one of you to temporarily leave your job and stay at home to care for the baby after its birth. Given that your wife and you have similar salaries and career prospects, would you choose to be the one to stay at home?

您是一位丈夫，您的妻子最近怀孕了。您和她正在讨论宝宝出生后的一段时间内，需要有人暂时离开工作，回归家庭照顾宝宝。考虑到您的妻子和你有相似的薪资待遇和工作前景，您会选择自己回归家庭吗

Analysis

The openness of attitudes towards gender stereotypes across generations was analyzed using t-test, by comparing participants born between 1994 and 2024 (younger generation) with those born between 1964 and 1993 (older generation).

Results and Discussion

Hypothesis One: The younger generation is more open-minded about gender stereotypes or roles than the older generation.

By comparing the overall mean scores on the scales measuring attitudes towards gender stereotypes, no significant difference was observed between the younger generation (Mean = 2.52, Standard Deviation = 0.35) and the older generation (Mean = 2.69, Standard Deviation = 0.28); $t(150) = -3.46, p = .35$. When focusing on the mean scores of the first section, which measures a general attitude toward gender stereotypes, there was also no significant difference between the younger generation (Mean = 1.77, Standard Deviation = 0.60) and the older generation (Mean = 2.27, Standard Deviation = 0.52); $t(150) = -5.56, p = 0.12$.

However, in the analysis of the mean scores of the second section, which evaluates specific aspects in gender stereotype attitudes, revealed a marginally significant difference. The younger generation scored higher (Mean = 3.53, Standard Deviation = 0.52) compared to the older generation (Mean = 3.27, Standard Deviation = 0.30); $t(150) = 3.99, p = 0.06$. Given the marginally significant results from the analysis of the second section, we decided to further analyze the second group of data to uncover the nuances in gender-specific attitudes towards gender stereotypes across different generations.

Table 1 Independent Samples t-test: Comparison of Older and Younger Generations on Their Attitudes Towards Gender Stereotypes

Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value
Younger Generation	63	3.53	0.52	3.99	150	<0.001
Older Generation	89	3.27	0.30			

Table 2 Independent Samples t-test: Comparison of Attitudes Towards Gender Stereotypes Between Older and Younger Male Generations

Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value
Younger Generation	23	3.48	0.33	2.75	45	0.01
Older Generation	24	3.24	0.26			

Table 3 Independent Samples t-test: Comparison of Attitudes Towards Gender Stereotypes Between Older and Younger Female Generations

Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value
Younger Generation	40	3.56	0.60	3.17	102	0.00
Older Generation	65	3.27	0.31			

Hypothesis Two: Women from the younger generation are more open-minded about gender stereotypes or roles than those from the older generation.

The results for men (Gender=1) had relatively close mean scores, with the younger generation at 3.48 (SD = .33) and the older generation at 3.34 (SD = .26). The t-test showed a p-value of .53. The results for women (Gender=2) showed larger differences. The mean score for the younger generation is 3.56 (SD = .60), while the older group is 3.27 (SD = .31). The t-test showed a p-value of .08, suggesting a marginally significant difference between the attitudes of younger and older women. The analysis of the results in relation to the two hypotheses reveals nuanced insights into the perceptions of gender stereotypes across generations and genders within the People's Republic of China.

Discussion of Hypothesis One

The t-test comparison between younger and older generations regarding their attitudes towards gender stereotypes did not reveal a statistically significant difference, for both general attitudes and specific gender stereotype scenarios. This suggests that, contrary to the hypothesis, there isn't a clear generational divide in open-mindedness towards gender stereotypes. The nearly similar mean scores indicate that both the younger (1994-2024) and older generations (1964-1993) hold comparable views on gender roles and stereotypes overall. However, a marginally significant difference observed in responses to specific gender stereotypical questions suggests a subtle generational shift. The younger generation appears slightly more open-minded in their attitudes towards specific gender roles than the older generation. This slight variance could imply the beginning of a shift in societal norms influenced by global trends, digital exposure, and education, although the impact is not yet profound enough to constitute a statistically significant generational divide. This sug-

gests the likely persistence of gender stereotypes within Chinese society, even as incremental changes take root among younger cohorts.

Discussion of Hypothesis Two

When analyzing the data by gender, the findings indicate no significant difference in attitudes between younger and older men towards gender stereotypes. This uniformity suggests that men's views on gender roles may be more stable across generations, potentially due to consistent societal expectations and norms directed at men over the years. In contrast, the analysis of women's attitudes towards gender stereotypes showed a marginally significant difference, hinting at a potential generational shift. Younger women displayed a slightly more open-minded stance towards gender roles than older women. This trend among women, as opposed to the stability seen in men's attitudes, suggests that societal changes, status changes and gender equality movements may have a more pronounced impact on women's perceptions of gender roles.

The results suggest that while there is evidence of a generational shift in attitudes towards gender stereotypes, particularly among women, the overall attitude remains relatively consistent across generations. This consistency could reflect deeply ingrained cultural norms and societal expectations that are slow to evolve. However, the marginally significant differences observed, especially among younger women, underscore the potential for gradual societal change influenced by modernization, globalization, and increased advocacy for gender equality.

The marginal significance in women's attitudes towards gender stereotypes highlights the importance of continuing to challenge traditional norms and promote gender equality. It suggests that efforts to advocate for more equitable gender roles are beginning to appear, particularly among younger women who may be more exposed to social media and influenced by movements

of gender equality.

Conclusion

Chinese citizens' general attitudes towards gender stereotypes, and their reactions to specific gender-related scenarios. Our findings showed marginal significance suggesting a slight generational shift towards more open-mindedness among younger individuals, particularly among women. This provides some empirical support for the long-debated post-materialism thesis, attesting to its applicability in a country that arguably experienced later economic modernisation and thus excluded from Inglehart's original sample space.

Limitations and possible Improvements

Given our reliance on snowball sampling, we acknowledge potential limitations in the representativeness of our sample. This non-random sampling technique can introduce bias, as participants may share similar backgrounds or views, especially given the initial distribution through personal networks. However, snowball sampling was chosen for its efficacy in reaching a wider array of participants within the constraints of our study's context. Some of the findings, particularly those indicating marginal significance (p-values close to .05), suggest caution in interpretation. While these results hint at potential generational shifts in attitudes towards gender stereotypes, they do not meet the conventional threshold for statistical significance. This could be due to a variety of factors, including sample size, variability within the sample, or the actual closeness of attitudes between groups. The division of participants into two groups based on a 30-year span raises concerns about the nuances within each generational cohort being overlooked. Specifically, the youngest participant assessed in group 1 is 12 years old, meaning that ages below 12 were not evaluated. This limitation minimizes the sample to a very narrow extent, potentially missing out on insights from younger participants who could exhibit different attitudes toward gender stereotypes.

Future studies could benefit from employing more randomized sampling techniques to enhance the representativeness of the sample. Additionally, increasing the sample size could improve the study's power to detect statistically significant differences between groups. A larger, more diverse sample would also allow for the exploration of sub-group analyses, potentially uncovering more insights into generational attitudes toward gender stereotypes. Moreover, implementing a longitudinal study design could track how attitudes evolve over time within the same individuals or cohorts. This approach would offer a more dynamic view of changing perceptions, providing stronger evidence of generational shifts and the impact of societal changes on gender stereotypes. Lastly, broadening the range of mea-

surement tools to include qualitative interviews or focus groups could provide deeper insights into the reasoning behind participants' attitudes. This mixed-methods approach would complement quantitative findings, offering a more comprehensive understanding of attitudes toward gender stereotypes. Additionally, future studies might benefit from adopting more complex and rigorous research designs, such as multivariate OLS regression and ANOVA, to better account for and exclude the impact of confounding variables.

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