

 [Inter-generational Conflicts in China by Zhipeng \(Simon\) Gao](#) by Louise

S. [2014, Dec 28]

Dear Louise and all,

As I promised, here is an abstract of our work in progress on inter-generational conflicts in China from a constructionist perspective. Thanks for your interest and we appreciate any comments/feedback!

Identity, Memory and Stigmatization of Chinese Elders

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And

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This paper addresses the causes and policy implications of recent discrimination against elders in China. Over the past ten years, an astonishing widespread backlash against elders in public interaction has defied the thousand-year-old Chinese tradition of revering the elderly. Incited by frequent reports of elders suing people who helped them after accidents, playing loud, "unrefined" music in public squares when dancing, and asserting the right to take over bus seats, many Chinese people have begun to view the elder generation with antipathy. This backlash has intensified to the extent that people have fired rifles and hurled human waste to deter elders from making noise in public squares, disregarded dying elders on the street, and launched into fistfights with elders on buses. While there are voices critical of the younger generation's indifference, no less prevalent is a discriminatory discourse blaming elders for their reported ill conducts. This popular discourse argues that the elderly generation is a corrupted and greedy one for having suffered material scarcity during the 1958-1961 Great Famine and spiritual scarcity under the Communist ideology, as well as for having violently participated in the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution.

Our paper aims to explain the psychological and social causes of the backlash and the associated stigmatizing discourse. We examined over a thousand available journal articles, media reports, videos and blogs in order to reconstruct the development of and controversies surrounding the backlash against the elders. Next, we analyzed surveys, case studies, interviews, as well as theoretical papers to elucidate the multifaceted conditions and causes of the discrimination. Finally, drawing on the cognitive theory of memory, we interviewed younger Chinese subjects to investigate how they unwittingly construct false, ageist memories under the influence of mass media and within concrete conversation with people of similar identity.

Based on the above research, we conclude that the backlash against the elders' generation had a psychological cause, rooted in specific social conditions. The aging Chinese population, a large influx of migrant workers, as well as slow infrastructure development have jointly resulted in shortage of urban public resources such as transportation and space, which condition the competition among generations. Since the Economic Reforms of 1978, the importation of Western culture has created significant value differences between the elder and younger Chinese generations. Rapid social transformations have led to many social problems, causing a great many of what McLuhan calls moral panics. We argue that the younger generations rationalize their part in the intergenerational conflict by using the elder generation's unfortunate past as a discursive resource in a moralizing fashion. This mistaken rationalization has been coopted and overrepresented by mass media, often itself in the hands of the younger generations, which further perpetuates the stigmatizing anti-elder discourse. So far, public policy measures have been ineffective to alleviate the intergenerational conflict because they have failed to challenge the validity of the discriminatory discourse, which is constructed through intricate dynamics among the Cultural Revolution's legacy, China's changing social conditions, media misrepresentation and media users' age identities.

Two relevant pieces of media coverage (click to open):

China Daily: Need to protect our Good Samaritans

BBC news: Dancing Grannies raise a ruckus

Happy new year,

Zhipeng

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 [Comment by Zhipeng \(Simon\) Gao](#) by Louise S. [2015, Apr 05]

Hi Louise,

Kathy and I just finished writing the article on intergenerational conflict in China. We are pleased to share it with our task force and possibly hear any feedback.

All the best,
Zhipeng

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 [Case study of intergenerational conflicts in China](#)