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China is not Monolithic: Defining Generations Within the Chinese Social Context

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TAKEAWAY

The current, senior leadership in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and People's Liberation Army (PLA) are primarily from the 50's decade-based generation. Their outlook on the world is different from the more open-minded 80's decade-based generation that will dominate the field grade and flag officer corps in the mid-2030s when China anticipates overtaking the U.S. as a military force.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Generational labels in China, defined by decades of birth or shared experiences, shape collective personalities and perspectives, influencing China's societal evolution and global interactions.
- Senior leadership positions in the CCP and PLA are dominated by the "50s generation", whose values include collectivism and a strong loyalty to institutions, reflecting their upbringing in the Mao era.
- Subsequent generations, from the "60s" to the "post-2000s," demonstrate a shift from complete collectivism to aspects of individualism, with each showing varying degrees of adaptability, entrepreneurial spirit, and global integration shaped by China's economic reforms and technological advancements.

IMPLICATIONS

Detailed generational understanding enhances the U.S. Army's cultural competency, enabling more effective operations tailored to influence PLA soldiers of specific generations, leveraging generational values and communication styles for strategic advantages in warfare. Senior PLA leadership perspectives are char-

acterized by significant personal experiences as youth during the era of Mao's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, whereas senior leaders of the future will likely be characterized by youth experiences associated with Deng Xiaoping's "opening up" era and subsequent broadening of worldviews.

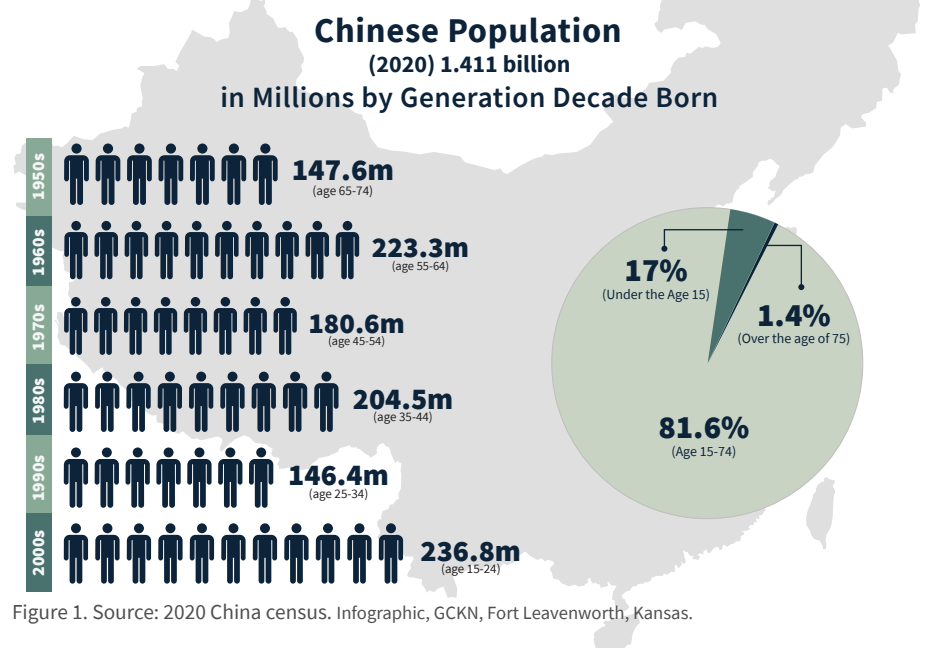


Figure 1. Source: 2020 China census. Infographic, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Insight into the generational shift towards individualism and technological savviness in younger PLA cohorts can guide the development of cyber warfare and social media strategies, focusing on cyber tactics that exploit generational gaps in digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness within the PLA.

Understanding the cultural characteristics of different Chinese generations is vital for the U.S. Army to effectively engage with the PLA or create accurate exercise scenarios. Appreciating generational diversity and overcoming the generalization that Chinese culture and society are monolithic provides insights into the diverse perspectives, motivations, and experiences of each generation and enables nuanced planning, engagement, and exercise development. The PLA reflects China's diverse population. Therefore, acute insight into generational differences will reveal the country's evolving aspirations and challenges, ultimately enhancing awareness and improving decision making.

In China, generational labels are typically defined by decade of birth or by shared experiences and events that shape their collective personality. Commonly used generational labels in China include:

The 50s generation (born between 1950 and 1959) is a cohort profoundly shaped by the Mao Zedong era and the tumultuous Cultural Revolution that began in 1966. Characterized by an unwavering resilience, this generation exhibits a deep commitment to Maoism's political and ideological principles, fostered during their formative years of intense political indoctrination into Leninism-Marxism with Chinese characteristics. The 50s generation is marked by their adaptability and survivor mentality, having navigated periods of significant political unrest, economic scarcity, and social upheaval. Despite disruptions in formal education, they hold a high regard for knowledge, a sentiment reinforced during the post-Cultural Revolution educational reforms. This generation is defined by a strong sense of collectivism, often placing communal needs above individual desires, a reflection of the socio-political ethos of their youth. They exhibit conservative social and cultural views, a penchant for frugality and resourcefulness born out of economic hardship, and a robust work ethic. This generation's loyalty to institutions and a deep respect for authority and hierarchical structures notably mirror their early years of political and

Recognizing generational differences enables nuanced planning, engagement, and exercise development.

social order. These characteristics collectively paint a portrait of a generation that has been pivotal in shaping modern Chinese society and its institutions. President Xi Jinping is a member of this decade cohort, as are many of the CCP's and PLA's most senior leaders.

The 60s generation (born between 1960 and 1969) represents a unique cohort that came of age in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward and amidst the Cultural Revolution. This generation is distinguished by its adaptability and pragmatism, traits forged in an era of significant socio-political flux and economic transformation. Coming into adulthood during China's pivotal reform period in the late 1970s and 1980s, they witnessed and participated in the country's dramatic shift from Maoist policies to a more open and market-driven economy initiated by Deng Xiaoping. This exposure to rapid change instilled in them a flexible mindset and a practical approach to problem-solving. They have seen the juxtaposition of old and new China, giving them a unique perspective on the challenges and opportunities that change presents. This generation's experiences during these transformative years have shaped their worldviews and impacted the broader trajectory of Chinese society and its evolving identity. Fintech billionaire and controversial entrepreneur Jack Ma is a member of this decade cohort as are many PLA flag officers.

The 70s generation (born between 1970 and 1979) matured during the nascent stages of China's groundbreaking economic reform and opening-up policies. This era, pivotal in shaping modern China, imprinted on them a distinct entrepreneurial spirit and a receptiveness to new ideas. As witnesses to the country's transition from a closed, centrally planned economy to a burgeoning global market player, this generation developed a keen sense for innovation and a willingness to embrace change. Their formative years were marked by increasing exposure to international influences, such as attending universities in the United States in large

numbers and taking part in burgeoning private enterprises. These opportunities fostered a mindset that values adaptability, competitive drive, and a forward-thinking approach. This openness to new ideas and experiences, combined with the backdrop of economic liberalization, has made them instrumental in driving China's rapid economic growth and modernization. The 1970s generation thus stands out for its unique blend of traditional Chinese values and enthusiasm for exploring uncharted avenues in business and broader societal contexts. Yang Lan, a media owner, executive and immensely popular public influencer is an example of the 70s-decade cohort. Most field grade officers in the PLA are from this generation and will be the PLA's flag officer leadership corps in the 2030s, which is when the People's Republic of China (PRC) expects its military to be a direct peer to the U.S.

The 80s generation (born between 1980 and 1989), known as the "post-80s" or "baling hou" (八零后) represents a pivotal shift in the social fabric of the nation, influenced mainly by the one-child policy introduced in 1979. As the first generation that was predominantly raised as only children, they grew up in a period marked by rapid economic growth and societal transformation. This unique upbringing instilled in them a pronounced sense of individualism and a strong desire for self-expression, setting them apart from the more collective-oriented mindset of earlier generations. The combination of being the sole focus of their family's attention and the exposure to a burgeoning economy and a more open society led to a heightened awareness of personal rights and aspirations. Their childhood, characterized by increased access to global cultures and ideas, fostered a diverse worldview and a pursuit of personal freedom and self-fulfillment. This generation is often seen as the driving force behind modern Chinese consumerism and urban culture, shaping new trends and lifestyles.

The "post-80s" are also distinct in their assertive pursuit of personal goals, often questioning traditional norms and values. Their experience of growing up in a time of relative abundance and fewer political restraints than their predecessors has crafted a unique blend of traditional Chinese values and modern global influences. This blend is pivotal in shaping contemporary Chinese culture and its evolving identity, particularly in an increasingly interconnected global landscape.

The 90s generation (born between 1990 and 1999) or "jiuling hou" (九零后) represents a distinct departure from the previous "post-80s" cohort, despite both being raised predominantly as only children under the one-child policy. This generation's defining characteristic is their upbringing during the rapid proliferation of the Internet and mobile smart technology, making them China's first true digital natives. Their constant connectivity from a young age gave them immediate access to global information and cultures, fostering a broader, more interconnected worldview than the gradual global exposure experienced by the "post-80s".

As the first generation to grow up fully immersed in a digital world, the "post-90s" are highly tech-savvy and trend-conscious, often blending their Chinese identity with global perspectives. Their experiences in a more economically and culturally confident China have shaped their ambitions, leading to a notable entrepreneurial and innovative spirit and a very strong sense of national pride, patriotism—and perhaps cultural superiority. While consumerism and individualism are traits shared with the "post-80s", the "post-90s" generation approaches these with a heightened emphasis on uniqueness and self-expression, influenced by the diverse, digitally driven environment they inhabit. This blend of traditional Chinese values with a strong digital and global influence positions them as a dynamic force in shaping China's future societal and global engagements. This generation, like many from the post-80s generation, form the junior and middle ranks of the PLA officer corps, with many becoming field grade officers in the 2030s.

The 2000s generation (born between 2000 and 2009), known as the "post-2000s" or "post-00s," has matured in an era where China has solidified its status as a global superpower, experiencing remarkable economic growth and a significant reduction in nationwide poverty. Having never known a China that wasn't an influential economic and political force, this generation naturally perceives its country's dominant position in the world as rightful and unexceptional. Their upbringing in a time of prosperity and national confidence profoundly influences their worldview, inclining them to see the CCP model of governance and its economic approach as a viable, even preferable, alternative to Western-led paradigms.

This generation's exposure to China at the zenith of its power shapes their expectations and aspirations, fostering a sense of global ambition and national pride. The narrative of a triumphant rise and a vision of continuing ascendancy colors their understanding of China's role on the world stage. This perception is further reinforced by their frequent and broad exposure to global cultures and ideas, notably through education, while remaining prideful of a superior China filtered through their perspective. Unlike previous generations, for whom studying abroad was often a privilege facilitated by government scholarships, the "post-00s" increasingly pursue international education as an affluent rite of passage. This access to global education, combined with their formative experiences in a thriving China, cultivates a unique blend of international outlook and patriotic fervor.

As the youngest members of this generation start entering institutions like the PLA, they bring a distinct set of perspectives shaped by living in a nation of growing prosperity and power. Their views on technology, globalization, and China's role will likely influence such institutions' future strategies and policies, reflecting a generation confident in its national identity and place in the global order.

Implications for the US Army

Grasping the nuances of generational differences within the PRC and the PLA is imperative for U.S. military planners, exercise developers, staff officers, and policymakers. Insight into generational similarities and differences provides a window into the PLA by understanding the experiences, motivations, and cognitive processes of its evolving leadership. This understanding is more than academic and nice to know; it holds practical implications for the United States as it navigates the complex geopolitical landscape, especially in efforts to maintain the current world order and counter-balance China's growing influence. Three concrete applications of generational differences might be:

- **Enhanced Cultural Competency for Enhanced Influence:** Detailed generational understanding enhances the U.S. Army's cultural competency, enabling more effective operations tailored to influence PLA soldiers of specific generations, leveraging generational values and communication styles for strategic advantages in conflict, especially psychological warfare.
- **Strategic Recruitment and Alliance Building:** Knowledge of generational attitudes towards authority

and the state can inform U.S. Army strategies for recruitment and alliance-building within regions of strategic interest to the United States, targeting demographics within China and its allies that may be more receptive to U.S. narratives or skeptical of CCP policies.

- **Adapted Cyber Engagement Tactics:** Insight into the generational shift towards individualism and technological savviness in younger PLA cohorts can guide the development of cyber warfare and social media strategies, focusing on cyber tactics that exploit generational gaps in digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness within the PLA.

For the United States, recognizing these generational shifts is crucial in crafting strategies responsive to the changing dynamics within the PLA. The varying risk tolerances, decision-making styles, and technological proficiencies across generations can significantly influence the PLA's approach to international engagement, military strategy, and potential conflict scenarios, such as over Taiwan or in interactions with US allies like Japan and South Korea. As the younger, more globally aware, and technologically adept generations ascend within the PLA, their differing viewpoints on international relations and military engagement could reshape the PLA's strategic outlook.

Moreover, understanding these generational perspectives aids in anticipating how the PLA might evolve in the next decade, a period where the United States seeks to contain China's expansion without resorting to large-scale military operations. It informs diplomatic and military interactions, allowing for more effective communication and cooperation, in addition to potentially identifying areas of mutual interest and avenues for de-escalation. Therefore, a deep comprehension of China's generational diversity is valuable and essential for the United States in seeking to navigate the challenges posed by a rising China and uphold US strategic interests in an increasingly multipolar world.

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