Confucian or Communist, Post-Mao or Postmodern? Exploring the narrative identity resources
of Shanghai's Post-80s generation

by

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Abstract

It is 30 years after Post-Mao reforms, 20 years after Tiananmen Square demonstrations, and the next generation of “comrades” are emerging in China. They are called the *Balinghou* or “Post-80s” generation, referring to the cohort born between 1980 and 1989. This study addresses an empirical gap by exploring the narrative resources Shanghai’s Post-80s young adults call on to construct their identities, given the historical situation in which they live. This exploration is achieved through qualitative empirical data by employing a combination of narrative analysis and ethnography. Data analysis uncovers narrative resources clustered around three common themes: generational identity, structural resources, and personal lives. Further reflection reveals that the extent to which identity is narratively expressed can be culturally constrained. Although the Balinghou encounter unique external factors such as the One Child Policy and rapid economic growth and reform in China, their narrative identity resources are more related to their perceptions of life stages than unprecedented historical circumstance.

Keywords: narrative, identity, life course, symbolic interactionism, China, Shanghai, Balinghou, Post-80s generation

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十年一茬人 (shí nián yī chá rén). 10 years is a generation.

--Saying from popular Chinese speech

It is 30 years after Post-Mao reforms, 20 years after the Tiananmen Square demonstrations, and the next generation of “comrades” are emerging in China. They are called the *Balinghou* or “Post-80s” generation (Guan, 2009, ¶ 3). One could argue that every generation is historically unprecedented, but the conditions of this group are particularly unique. Unlike their parents who lived through turbulent political movements like the Cultural Revolution, the *Balinghou*¹, born between 1980 and 1989, have witnessed China's gradual opening up and rapid economic growth. They are a large population of roughly 300 million, the majority of which are only children due to the One Child Policy established in 1979 (Elegant, 2007). As the lives they choose to lead will impact the future of their country and the world, it is important for social scientists to have an understanding of this under-examined and influential generation. This study addresses an empirical gap by examining identity construction among these young adults.

Despite a growing movement towards the internationalization of the discipline (Shome, 2009), cultural studies have not adequately explored developing nations (During, 2005), especially China. In an attempt to contribute to the growth of contemporary cultural studies, I use narrative ethnography (Goodall, 2004) to study identity construction among the *Balinghou*. In particular, I explore what narrative resources Shanghai's Post-80s young adults call on to construct their identities, given the unique historical situation in which they live. The goal is to

¹ Throughout this paper, the Chinese term “*Balinghou*” and the direct English translation “Post-80s” will be used interchangeably.

uncover identity-forming resources by focusing on aspects of narrative composition such as narrative linkage, editing, and slippage (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998, 2000b). Here, resources are conceived broadly to encompass life experiences, elements of local culture, biographical particulars, language use, and a host of other aspects that can be incorporated into personal stories. Resources are the “whats” of narration; they are the elements of which the self is composed (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998, 2000b). The present analysis utilizes analytical bracketing to focus on only one aspect of narrative practice, namely resources, while temporarily deferring discussion of others, such as storytelling conditions and activities (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998, p. 165). The larger objective of this research is to enhance global understanding, hopefully contributing to intercultural dialogues with the Balinghou in the years and decades to come. Further insights into their personal and social realities will be beneficial both domestically and abroad, as even within China there is limited knowledge on the Post-80s group.

The goal and objective of this study are accomplished through a combination of narrative analysis and ethnography, achieved by the researcher living in China while studying subjective realities of local individuals. Specifically, as a Canadian living in Shanghai for close to four years, I have learned about contemporary Chinese culture including that of the Balinghou, and since I am also born after 1980, I belong to the same global birth cohort as my participants. In North America and other parts of the world, this cohort is often called Generation Y.

This paper will first describe the theoretical perspective of the study, review relevant literature, and then outline research methods and the data collection process. Subsequently, three prominent themes that emerged during data analysis will be discussed. Finally, concluding thoughts are presented.

Narratives and Identity Construction

This study takes the theoretical perspective of narrative symbolic interactionism which posits that individuals interpret and construct meaning through interaction and storytelling (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000b, p. 103). Within this approach the concern is not with whether narratives presented are true or accurate, but with “how individuals give coherence to their lives when they write or talk self-autobiographies” (Denzin, 1989, p. 62) or everyday life stories. Through this theoretical lens structural elements including culture, political systems, and social roles set conditions within which individuals construct their identities, but these elements do not determine selves or prescribe their actions (Blumer, 1969).

A key component of this perspective is self-identification. Jenkins (2008) defines identification as an “internal-external dialectic” the “process whereby all identities— individual and collective—are constituted” (p. 40). He argues that individual and collective identities should be understood using one model, whereby the individual level emphasizes difference and the collective emphasizes similarity (Jenkins, 2008, p. 38). Accordingly, this research considers the cohort born after 1980 to be a collective, and will examine both the generational identity and the individual identities of its members.

Storytelling has been described as an ontological condition of human life (Phoenix and Sparkes, 2009), with narrative research as an acknowledged means to study “the ways in which individuals make sense of their lives within a changing socio-historical context” (Phinney, 2000, p. 27). Although many qualitative methods investigate narratives, narrative research brings stories to the forefront to say something about the human condition. Using narratives as the focus of inquiry contributes to the analysis and understanding of constructed social realities such as identity.

Holstein and Gubrium have developed key concepts for talking about personal stories. Amongst these concepts are: narrative practice, narrative composition, narrative linkage, and narrative editing. *Narrative practice* includes the activities of storytelling, the resources used to tell stories, and the auspices under which stories are told; in other words, the “hows” and “whats” of narration (1998, p. 162). *Narrative composition* frames storytelling as an ongoing process of construction rather than a reporting of experience (2000b, p. 107). *Narrative linkage* refers to the way cultural categories provide narrative resources for constructing stories, but they do not determine individual story lines. *Narrative slippage* is the cultural categories that appear to be left out or minimized in personal stories. Finally, *narrative editing* is the process of storytellers modifying themes and storylines as the narrative is being told (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998, 2000).

The identity of Chinese nationals has been studied in a variety of contexts. There is research looking at Chinese identity outside of mainland China, for example in Taiwan (Huang, Liu, & Chang, 2004), Hong Kong (Fung, 2001; Kit-Wai Ma, 2001), and the United States (Hong, Ip, Chiu, Morris, & Menon, 2001). There are studies conducted within China that investigate young adults and their identities, but these studies are focused on a specific area of inquiry, such as consumer decision making (Fan & Xiao, 1998), filial piety (Liu, 2008b), ideal personhood (Fong, 2007), or life planning and higher education (Liu, 2008a). Ho and Ng (2008) carried out narrative and observational research in Shanghai using contemporary ethnography, but it was not generationally specific. Furthermore, both foreign and Chinese media give attention to Balinghou, yet these pieces mostly trumpet their unsavory characteristics such as selfish tendencies, rampant spending habits, and rebellious, non-traditional behaviors (see Chen, 2009; Elegant, 2007; Foo, 2009; Guan, 2009; McGee, 2007; Qi, 2009; Wang, 2009). This study, on the

other hand, openly explores identity-forming resources in the narratives of Post-80s young adults according to their self stories.

The Life Course

Throughout the process of self-identification it is common for people to call upon narrative resources that relate to age and the life course. The life course can be thought of as a sequence of culturally defined stages or roles in life that individuals enact during their lifetime (Giele & Elder, 1998). Names for life stages such as childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age, expectations of what types of priorities, experiences or achievements the stages should consist of, goals related to chronological age, attributes such as maturity or independence, and formative life events can all be considered as narrative resources connected to the life course. The life course is not passively adopted and its stages do not merely sequentially unfold for individuals—it is a process whereby social selves construct the meaning of their lives over time (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000a, p. 182).

The life course is thought to be recognized in all societies, but its specific features, such as the notion of time or what the stages of life are, vary across cultures (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000a, p. 34). For example, in Western cultures we think of time as linear and its passing as beyond our control. Changes in our lives are linked to underlying chronology. However, other cultures may conceive time as cyclical or open ended, or adopt beliefs such as reincarnation, resulting in different expectations of what constitutes the stages of the life course.

Generational groups such as the Balinghou, which have been exposed to historical influences that shaped the development of almost all group members growing up at that time, will share a cultural identity that sets them apart from the parental generation (Alwin & McCammon, 2003, p. 24). In this study, generation refers to a birth cohort, specifically those

born between 1980 to 1989, who have experienced the same historical events at the same time in their lives. The term *cohort effect* has been used to describe “a distinctive formative experience which members of a birth cohort share that lasts— and marks them— throughout their lives” (Alwin and McCammon, 2003, p. 26). Examples from the American context include time periods like the Great Depression and events such as the first time women were allowed to vote. In this study I am not concerned with discerning which experiences or events are responsible for the display of certain generational characteristics (for example, I would not claim that the One Child Policy had resulted in Post-80s being spoiled, as older generations often do); rather, following the interpretive approach, I focus on how these experiences are used as resources for the construction of identity.

Previous narrative research studies have investigated meaning-making activities surrounding the life course in the American context (Gubrium, 2006; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009). In China, Zhou and Hou (1999) investigated the “sending-down policy” during the Cultural Revolution and its effect on the life course, while Hung and Chiu (2003) studied the experience of laid-off workers during the reform of state-owned enterprises in the late 1990s from the life course perspective. However, there are no studies in English on the Post-80s group that utilized a constructivist approach to the life course.

Method

I draw upon data collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews conducted in English. This allows for the use of open-ended questions that elicit narratives and a conversational format to probe more deeply into responses (Wengraf, 2001). Between December 2009 and April 2010 I conducted 16 interviews with young adults living in Shanghai—12 individual and 4 group interviews— for a total of 21 participants. I recruited participants through snowball sampling

originated through acquaintances. Following a verbal explanation of my research project, I invited potential participants to take part in the research and scheduled the interview. Individual interviews took place in coffee shops or restaurants to provide a comfortable one-on-one atmosphere, and group interviews were held at my apartment. Consent forms (in English and Chinese) were sent over email for participants to indicate their informed consent. Interviews lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours in length. Group interviews were conducted to encourage discussion that could lead to different types of responses than one-on-one conversations. After 16 interviews, I reached theoretical saturation (see Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 102).

I interviewed young adults currently living in Shanghai who were born from 1980 to 1989 who were working professionals or graduate students. These candidates are most likely to rise to positions of influence and interact in the globalized world in a significant way as businesspeople, government officials, academics, and more. Two thirds of participants were the only child in their family (67%). One third were from Shanghai whereas the remainder were born and raised in other parts of China (this is a fairly typical breakdown as young people from all over China come to Shanghai to further their education and careers). The median birth year of participants was 1984. Two-thirds of the respondents were female, and one third were male. However, there were no noteworthy differences in responses between genders, so the imbalance should not have led to skewed findings.

My interviews included a brief collection of demographic information (including city of origin, age, gender, marital status, number of siblings, employment situation). The interview guideline was based on the interplays of identity-related factors such as the individual and the collective, the internal and the external, and similarity and difference, as discussed by Jenkins (2008). I first asked participants to tell me about themselves and then to outline characteristics of

the Balinghou. I inquired as to what made them similar to other members of their generation, and what made them different. I also asked who they compared themselves to (to uncover relevant “others”), and whether they had a role model. The order of questions varied slightly from interview to interview, and I would pose additional questions or paraphrase to encourage participants to expand on or clarify their responses. I took detailed hand-written notes during interviews.

All participants spoke English well enough to clearly convey their thoughts. Those born after 1980 in China, especially in large cities, have studied English from the time they were in junior high school. Moreover, when the term Balinghou is used it usually refers to those members of the group that speak English and live in more urban areas, as was verified by a number of participants. The use of the English language did not greatly impact data collection, particularly as I focused on identifying narrative resources and giving less attention to the act of narration itself. Admittedly, the data and findings may have been more refined and in-depth if the study had been conducted in Mandarin.

Prior to the interviews I was aware of characteristics of Chinese culture and communication such as the preference for modesty when talking about one’s self, the importance of face, and the use of indirect communication. As Xi (1994) explains “For a Chinese, self-centered speech would be considered boastful and pretentious... Chinese seem to prefer talking about external matters, such as world events” (p. 155). Face can be thought of as a desired self image shaped by approved social attributes (Goffman, 1967; Lim, 1994). Face also contributes to a preference for politeness in interaction, which can encourage the use of indirect forms of communication where the responsibility is on the receiver to interpret the true meaning of what is being said (Yum, 1988). I expected such cultural practices to influence participants to exclude

and edit their stories. On the contrary, I found participants to be highly enthusiastic to be interviewed and comfortable expressing a great deal about themselves to me. It was not until the data analysis phase that I came to realize potential omissions from narrative accounts. In group interviews some respondents showed more restraint, especially if those present did not know each other well beforehand. Although participants in group interviews rarely interrupted each other, they were comfortable stating their disagreement with others' responses.

Through the use of analytic bracketing I focused only on the “whats” of narration, namely the resources called upon for self construction, rather than the “hows” such as narrative circumstances and procedures (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998, p. 165). To organize interview texts to discover patterns that contribute to theory, I firstly read the notes and highlighted text relevant to narrative identity resources. Secondly, highlighted passages were given short-form codes. Third, codes were grouped together into categories, and categories were then clustered into themes linked to identity theory. Finally, this led to the production of a research text that presents participants' narratives in terms of my theoretical framework. The procedure outlined above was not rigid and in practice I went back and forth amongst the steps throughout the coding and analysis process.

The three key themes chosen for discussion in the data analysis section are achieving generational identity, using structural resources, and discussing personal lives. Within each of the themes the key resources drawn on will be discussed. The following pages are not intended to provide a descriptive list of generational characteristics, but rather to illustrate and analyze discursive resources raised by these members of the Post-80s group to enhance the understanding of their identity formation practices.

Achieving Generational Identity

Balinghou term

The label assigned to and used by this generation, “Balinghou”, is not merely a neutral marker but an interpretive term with associated meanings. A number of participants wondered where the term Balinghou actually came from. As one participant, Emily,² noted, Balinghou is the “first generation that raise so much discussion. Before Balinghou, they have never mentioned Post-70s, Post-60s, etc.” *Hou* means “post” or “after”, and once the Balinghou term was coined a variety of other labels for birth cohorts like Post-70s, Post-90s, etc. began to be used. Mark claimed Balinghou started the “hou” term. In other countries, decade or generation labels are often assigned by the media (Davis, 1984). This may have been the case for Balinghou, although the term could also have originated from a member of the group itself and communicated online. One participant speculated that there must be something that stands out about the Post-80s generation to warrant the creation of the label. Regardless of where it originated or why, the members of the cohort now use the name Balinghou themselves and it can be said to have contributed to their achievement of a generational identity.

Decade labelling (Davis, 1984, p. 16) is not a new phenomenon. Davis (1984) explained “by being in and of itself nothing more than a chronological succession of ten numbers, a decade is soon invested by people with its own distinct themes and motifs, thereby imparting to it a characteristic symbolic texture” (p. 16). He also noted “we have little idea of the actual interactions and exchanges by which ... decade labelling comes about” (Davis, 1984, p. 23). A number of participants felt the Post-80s generation should actually be thought of in two parts,

² Participants all regularly use English first names and Chinese last names for English communication, eg. Emily Zhang, Mark Chen, etc. Thus, English pseudonyms have been used here.

those born from 1980 to 1985, and those born from 1986 to 1989. They gave a special name to those born after 1985— *Bawuhou* (translated literally as “after 85”).

People belonging to the same life stage such as old age or adolescence have been found to arrange themselves into age subcultures (Neugarten, 1968), often to assist in their navigation of a period of transition (Hochschild, 1978). The identities of individuals within a generation or the collective identity of the generation itself is not determined by the age-related or decade-labeled subculture that exists, but the cultural elements are resources available for interpretive use (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000a, p. 207). This was reflected in the reluctance of some participants to utilize the Balinghou term, though they readily acknowledged their membership in this generation. For instance, Mark thought the term was unnecessary, stating the reason the Post-80s stand out is “just because the time changes...It’s just a generation.” Ryan felt “the more you look for it [generational characteristics], the more you find.” In other words, by giving the generation a special name and trying to determine its unique characteristics, distinguishing features will end up being assigned, although they may not have existed in the first place. Another participant, Rachel, said “Post-80s are compared to Post-70s, Post-90s, but it is society who made these names. We don’t think about ‘who are Post-80s?’, we think about what do we need to do for our life.” Rachel felt the Balinghou term had been externally applied to her generation, and that reflecting on characteristics of the collective identity was not as relevant as her own personal concerns.

The comments of Mark, Ryan, and Rachel can be seen as instances of narrative linkage where participants were provided with a cultural category, the Balinghou term, yet they chose to only partially invoke it. This is consistent with a previous study on how young-adult only-children university students negotiated their identities in relation to individualist versus socialist-

collectivist values. Liu (2008a) found that if the prescribed cultural scripts of a certain regime are not relevant to what they deem important for a good life, Chinese young people may ignore these elements by not including them in their narratives. Thus, since the Balinghou term has some negative attributes associated with it which participants may not feel are conducive to life success, they are reluctant to call on the term as a narrative resource.

Individual and collective characteristics

Asking participants to discuss characteristics of their generation gave them the opportunity to utilize those characteristics as resources for their own identity formation. Although individual and collective identities are often considered as separate phenomena, they can also be seen as entangled with one another and formed by analogous processes (Jenkins, 2008, p. 38). This connection between collective and individual identification can be seen in Melissa's response:

Balinghou refuse to grow up. They keep the habit of the kids. Even when they are married, they want to use their parents' money. Stay young as long as possible, not mature. That's like me, that's why I say I'm typical.

Similar to the excerpt above, descriptions such as immature, irresponsible, selfish, and financially dependent were often cited by participants, either as personal opinions about their cohort or as comments given by others. Lily recalled a dialogue between her and her new boyfriend: "My boyfriend is also an only child. He asked me 'Can you cook?' I asked him 'Can you cook?' 80s don't do housework very well. Parents always do it for them." As in this excerpt, some respondents would not state outright that they personally were immature or dependent on their parents, but it could be inferred from their response. Other frequently mentioned characteristics included Balinghou's open mindedness, their tendency to dream, that they are hard working and very realistic and practical.

Many of the characteristics identified, whether positive or negative, were related to maturity, which is linked to the life course. Maturity is a point in an individual's life when they may be said to be fully developed in certain respects, possibly no longer needing parental guidance or support. Consistent with the constructivist approach, I did not attempt to judge whether the Balinghou are mature or not, but rather I aimed to examine how they construct their own (im)maturity, or how a sense of maturation is achieved (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000a, p. 47). Participants usually associated maturity with financial independence from their parents, moving away from their hometown, or getting their first job (even if they were still living with their parents). Some participants felt that age or timing defined their generation more than unique characteristics did. For example, perhaps anyone in their early to mid 20s could be considered irresponsible or immature— they are still in the process of “growing up”; it is not because there is something special about the generational group in China, such as the fact that they are mostly only children. Yet, age can also be understood as something accomplished or performed (Laz, 2003), a chronological marker that we invest with meaning. In this sense age is not an excuse for immaturity unless it is narratively used that way.

In a study of high school seniors anticipating identity changes when leaving home for college, Karp, Holmstrom, and Gray (1998) found that students were “subject to definitions of themselves by family and friends which they find unflattering or wrong” (p. 264). In the case of the Balinghou, immaturity could be one such unflattering definition. Labels applied by influential players in our lives can impact our self-fashioning (Karp et al., 1998). However, from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the actor is in control of their reaction to the label, the manner by which he or she adopts it, and the extent to which it is incorporated into their conception of self (Herman-Kinney, 2003, p. 711).

Although not identified as a concern by any of the participants, it is interesting to consider how the government or media could have used the maturity/ immaturity discourse to stimulate the maturation of this important segment of society. With the Post-80s generation being majority single children and allegedly spoiled by their parents, as they entered young adulthood their immaturity may have become a societal concern. As discussions about this concern emerged in conversation and online, it could have contributed further to the feeling or behavior of immaturity among Balinghou. After all, “if one is constantly and consistently portrayed as immature, then immaturity permeates one’s self-definition” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 836). Discussing immaturity as a negative characteristic in the media could provide an impetus for Balinghou’s behavioral change (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000a, p. 187). In other words, it could have encouraged the Post-80s to “prove them wrong” by demonstrating their maturity and contributing to society in the ways needed at that time. At a certain point, the government or media would then change the messaging to focus on the maturity and coming of age of the Post-80s group to reinforce their position in society. As will be discussed later, this type of messaging surrounded the Sichuan Earthquake event.

Distancing and embracement

In a study on identity with homeless people in America, Snow and Anderson (1992) found some participants would engage in distancing and embracement activities when talking about their identity. The homeless would distance themselves from associations, roles, or institutions that were not consistent with their desired self conceptions and embrace favorable elements of social identity. Here, I use distancing to mean differentiating one’s self from certain characteristics (“That’s not me”, or “I’m not like that”), and embracing to be the association of the self with other characteristics (“That’s like me”). Although distancing and embracing could be thought of

as narrative activities rather than resources, they are still significant as it indicates the degree to which that participant associates him or herself with a given resource.

Ryan demonstrated distancing in this sentence: “Most of them say Balinghou are not caring, that they are self centered. This is one characteristic. Me, I’m ok.” Similarly, when speaking of his Shanghai friends and cousins his age, Allan said “Almost all of them depend on their parents, except me. I never took money from my parents after graduation. I’m independent, responsible for my future”. On the other hand, statements such as “I am a traditional Chinese girl” and “I am a typical Balinghou” showed an embracement of certain identity resources. Distancing and embracement are important as they demonstrate that generational characteristics or an age subculture are not automatically invoked by members. Individuals have narrative options for the extent to which they associate themselves with given resources.

Although narrative identity research does not strive to discern the truth of what is said by participants, it should be noted that during the interviews impression management was likely taking place. As Goffman (1959) explained: “when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey” (p. 4). In a different setting with a different audience, perhaps respondents would have distanced or embraced other characteristics than they did during my interviews with them.

Cross-generational comparisons

As Jenkins (2008) explains, identification involves both similarity and difference; one cannot exist without the other. He wrote: “Identity is our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and reciprocally, other people’s understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us). It is a very practical matter, synthesizing relationships of similarity and difference”

(Jenkins, 2008, p. 18). Thus, it is not surprising that in attempts to describe both their individual and collective identity narratives, participants actively made comparisons to past and recent generations.

Many of the comparisons made were between the Post-80s generation and that of their parents. They would often bring up the number of siblings their parents had, commonly from five or six up to ten. In addition, their parents' generation as well as those born after 1970 were often granted jobs in state owned enterprises, whereas the participants I spoke with had to find their jobs themselves in a highly competitive job market (Interestingly, the past 20 years could be the first time China's history that a large number of people had to seek employment from companies or other organizations in a competitive marketplace). Respondents often told of how their parents' generation could not go to university and lived through very hard times such as a period of starvation and the Cultural Revolution. They noted that their material well-being and living condition is much better than their parents was when they were growing up. Similarly, in describing a postcommunist identity crisis for the members of the former Soviet Union, Kon (1993) stated: "The acceleration of technological, social, and cultural changes makes generational differences more visible and puts more pressures on individual ability to meet new and unforeseen challenges, role-sets, and identities" (p. 396). Whether China has entered a postcommunist stage is debatable, but the rapid rate of change over the past two decades is obvious, making generational differences appear even more distinct.

Balinghou participants also made comparisons to the Post-90s cohort. They felt the Post-90s were much more reliant on and connected to technology and information, that they were not as serious about their study, and that their behavior was often not appropriate (that they use bad language, smoke at a young age, are disrespectful, etc.). Daniel, born in 1987, said the following:

“Both 90s and 80s are open. But our generation knows the important things we have to do. Responsibility to family, career. In our childhood we didn’t have much. Post-90s? They have everything. They don’t know what poor is.” A number of other participants also expressed this “they don’t know what poor is” sentiment towards the new generation. Thus, through comparisons with the Post-90s, important aspects of the Post-80s identity emerged from the narratives.

Here we can see that a generation does not stand alone— individual and collective identities are narratively linked to the generation preceding and the one following it (Davis, 1984). Also, the connection to the life course is apparent. Comparisons to previous and current generations were often made with reference to age or stage in life, for example “when they were my age” or “when I was their age”. Since the lives of their parents were so different than their own, participants often cited the generation gap. Their parents’ life experiences could not be used as a benchmark by which to judge their own. Here we can distinctly see that life stages are not prescribed but constructed based on the exigencies of the reality at hand— although their parents did not go to university, get a job in a company, or purchase a home, the Post-80s have adopted these stages and expectations for themselves.

Calling on challenges

When participants were asked to talk about themselves and their generation, they often called on their challenges as narrative resources. The most common challenges included parental expectations, pressure (mainly economic, and the pressure to get married), stress, competition, generation gap, not being able to achieve their dreams, and lack of stability. Many of these challenges are a result of macro-level factors, such as China’s speedy economic development and the large size of the Post-80s population. However, it should be noted that the participants in this

study are likely among the most ambitious and hard working of their cohort, with many of them graduating at the top of their class, being fluent in at least one foreign language, and working in large multinational or domestic companies. The intensity of these challenges may not be as pronounced for other subsets of the Post-80s group.

Many of the challenges and worries of the participants were related to whether or not they were where they needed to be at their age. Sara said “There is a saying in Chinese ‘san shi er li’, it means you should be stable at 30³.” Another participant, Jessica, explained that stability means your career and your family should be set up. 2010 is the year those people born in 1980 start to turn 30, and it seemed participants were keenly aware of this chronological landmark in relation to their own progress. This is consistent with Holstein and Gubrium (2000a)’s argument that “notions of a typical life course also serve as an interpretive resource for discerning normality in relation to chronological age” (p. 79). Tellers often divide their life stories into segments in order to differentiate the qualities, challenges, and priorities that distinguish the various times in their life. You can see Rachel’s notion of different life segments in her account below:

I left my family and came to Shanghai. I care about my career. I need to prove myself.

But someday I want to go back, have a family, be stable. There are different things you should do at different ages. It’s not about “Post-80s”, it’s about our age.

³ Saying may originate from the Confucian analects “At fifteen my heart was set on learning; at thirty I stood firm; at forty I had no more doubts; at fifty I knew the mandate of heaven; at sixty my ear was obedient; at seventy I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing the norm.” From this phrase, alternative names for each decade of human life in Chinese were derived.

To the extent they are called upon by individuals, the constructed phases and stages of the life course help provide temporal order to the participants' lives (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 841). In Rachel's response, her compartmentalizing of what should be accomplished at different ages puts her current life situation in perspective and orients her for what the future has in store.

In every single interview, participants spoke of the issue of buying an apartment, and that their parents generally require that a young couple own an apartment before they are allowed to get married. Because marriage was seen as an important milestone in their life course, the Balinghou group felt a lot of pressure to get a house very soon. However, they also felt real estate prices, especially in Shanghai, are prohibitively high due to the growing economy. One participant, Emily, elaborated:

Balinghou complain. For 70s, the company or school gives them some place to live. We have very heavy burden to buy a house. Chinese people pay a lot of attention to house, earth. It is the connection to ancestors. Maybe this will change with Balinghou and Post-90s.

The Balinghou may see the transition to married life as "a change... which will definitively alter the shape of their futures and how they will define themselves", "a dramatic moment of personal transformation" (Karp et al., 1998, p. 259). At first glance it might appear that the Post-80s constantly talk about apartments, but the underlying narrative resource is that of a life accomplishment, marriage, that is surrounded by uncertainty for participants.

Some of the young adults differentiated themselves by indicating their rejection of established life stages. Tara stated "I'm special because I don't need to follow the steps", meaning she did not want to simply get married, buy a house, and have a child, as many of her peers did. Similarly, Allan explained "I don't want a mortgage, to pay money to the bank. So I

rent a house. Maybe because of that, I am unmarried...I don't want to settle down. Young people should be very flexible." In this passage the connection between buying a house and getting married is apparent. The participant also identified himself as a young person desiring flexibility, showing where he sees himself chronologically in the life course and his associated priorities. Here again, culturally available life stages are not passively called on but used selectively in individual identity construction.

Many of the challenges such as pressure and stress were derived from the goals and responsibilities the participants had taken upon themselves, as will be discussed in the "Personal Lives" section.

Using Structural Resources

One child policy

A resource called on by all participants that defined either their personal or generational identity is the One Child Policy, which can be thought of as a cohort effect. They recognized that the policy impacted their family structures and their childhood experiences significantly. As Leah expressed:

Parents only have one kid. We grow up very lonely. Hard to do team work in company. I always do something alone. Go to school alone, study alone. Summer holiday have to stay at home alone and watch TV. Parents lock you in the house. Used to watch *Growing Pains*, the American TV show. There were four kids on there, but we were alone.

When discussing the One Child Policy, Balinghou would often make comparisons to previous generations or people from other countries that had many siblings. If the participant did have brothers or sisters, they often cited it as a reason why they were different from others their age. Many respondents discussed the effects of the policy on family and society— from the children

being spoiled by so much attention to not integrating well into the work force when they were required to work with others.

Whyte (1985) found that changes in state policies in China during different historical periods have significantly affected the life chances of different cohorts. Although symbolic interactionism does not frame structural elements as determining, the One Child Policy could be considered exceptional as it differentiates the Balinghou from previous generations and people from other countries. In an ethnographic study of the consequences of the One Child Policy on teenagers in Dalian, China, Fong (2006) found that what mattered most was not their singleton status, but rather the fact that they were single children in a society accustomed to large families. Modernized societies favour small families that invest heavily in each child over large families that invest little in each child; a process that demographers call the *fertility transition* (Fong, 2006). Fong states that “China is the only society where the fertility transition was hastened by strictly enforced birth quotas” (p. 3). Thus, due to its local and global distinctiveness, it seems natural that being an only child as dictated by the One Child Policy would be incorporated into the identities of Post-80s individuals.

Recent history and events

It was apparent from participants’ responses that their personal and group identities had been impacted by historical events of their parents’ generation. Historic moments that anchor a decade in people’s minds include not only one decade but encompass several. As Davis (1984) stated, “The distinctive stamp which the new decade acquires is likely to be greatly influenced by the events, hopes and anxieties of the period immediately preceding its dawn” (p. 17). This can be seen in Ryan’s explanation below:

[Characteristics of the Balinghou] trace back to what parents of Balinghou are like. They were born from 1955-1960. They passed the time of Cultural Revolution. They had their own passion and dream, it was destroyed. They had their opinion, but they learned to shut up. Parents told me never to lead a group against the government or schools. You will be punished.

A number of participants mentioned that they not only strove to achieve their own aspirations in life, but that they must also fulfill the dreams their parents had for themselves that they were unable to achieve. As Sara said “Balinghou are special because a lot of expectations transferred onto them.” This is similar to what Liu (2008a) found in the narratives of young adults in China; the children of the generation deprived of higher education during the Cultural Revolution had to carry with them the ideals of their parents and attempt to compensate for what had been lost. This intergenerational transfer of aspirations may not only be a result of contemporary conditions in China, but also Confucian tradition. Kwang-Kuo Huang (1999) states that in Confucian ontology, individuals’ lives are assumed to be the continuation of their parents’ physical lives (p. 169). This continuation is not always harmonious, however. Calvin expanded on how his parents’ conception of how to achieve success was informed by their historical experience:

In their [the parents’] mind, the only way to have a good achievement is a good college. But as the saying goes, there are a lot of ways to Rome. Twenty years ago, there was only one. Society is growing. Definition of success is changing. There are a lot of ways to make money. So conflict happens [with parents]. Good score does not always mean good job.

In addition to referencing their parents’ conditions growing up, participants often mentioned specific historical events such as the Cultural Revolution, the closings of universities, a period of

starvation in 1963, *Zhiqing* (when their urban-dwelling parents were sent to work in agricultural camps in the countryside), and World War II (which affected their grandparents). More recent events called on included Hong Kong and Macau returning to China in 1997 and 1999 respectively, China entering the World Trade Organization in 2001, the Sichuan earthquake and the Tibetan uprisings in 2008, and the financial crisis. The Sichuan earthquake in particular was significant for Balinghou's generational identity— many participants touted it as the time when Post-80s proved to their critics that they were not irresponsible and selfish. They contributed greatly to the rescue efforts and demonstrated their patriotism, which was given considerable attention and praise by the media. One respondent, Rebecca, remarked “This was a successful propaganda by the government”.⁴ With numerous respondents citing this example, and using very similar wording to describe it, this may have been the case; regardless, the heroic acts of fellow Balinghou was an identity-constructing resource for the group. As mentioned earlier, this could have been the point when the government publically acknowledged the coming of age and responsibility of the Post-80s generation to assist them in the transition to responsible adulthood.

One noteworthy occurrence in China during Balinghou's childhood was the Tiananmen Square demonstrations; however, only one participant mentioned this event. Although those born after 1980s were young at the time of the incident, it would still seem reasonable that they vaguely remember or at least are aware of it. But as Davis (1984) mentioned, sometimes an event will not be associated with a generation if it is not convenient to do so. The last two decades in China have been characterized by economic development and gradual opening up, so the Tiananmen incident would serve to tarnish primarily positive portrayals. The omission of this

⁴ The word in Chinese “xuanchuan” is directly translated as propaganda, but it is also used for advertising, PR, or simply spreading the news about something. However, Rebecca had excellent English skills, so it seems she would have used the word to mean persuasive government communication.

cultural element from the narratives of the Balinghou could be an instance of narrative slippage, making it difficult to understand whether Tiananmen Square is not a narrative resource for the Balinghou, or if participants did not want to mention it.

Discussing Personal Lives

Goals and responsibilities

In all interviews, an area that was discussed at length and with emphasis was the participants' life goals and responsibilities. These were used as narrative resources for identity construction as they represented who they wanted to be. I did not ask specific questions related to goals or responsibilities, but they inevitably came up in the interviews. For example, in the response to the question "Tell me about yourself." Melissa began her response as follows:

I have two objectives: One, a good career, and two, a good life. For my career, I want to be very professional, to work in a big company, and to study hard. For my life, I want it to improve year by year. I want to have fun, many friends, from different cultures.

It was apparent that cultural scripts of what success is in the context of today's China were being used selectively by participants. Liu (2008a) found that young adults in China take an individualized, self-authoring approach to life planning and goals, and have their own concept of "the good life", which they see as the middle class lifestyle, modeled on perceptions of success in Western developed societies (Liu, 2008b). This can be seen in a conversation with Daniel below, where he emphasized a desire for personal wealth and the well-being of his family:

Daniel: We have a lot of energy, dreams. Most of them won't come true.

Me: What are those dreams?

Daniel: For me personally, Aston Martin [a luxury sports car]. Make my whole family happy, help them enjoy their life.

Many participants echoed this combination of individualistic pursuits and familial obligations. They portrayed a strong sense of responsibility to their family and their intention to support their parents in their old age. Achieving stability in their life was a high priority, basically meaning a good job with a steady salary, and owning a home. Here again, many of the goals and responsibilities participants spoke of were related to the life course, specifically what they should achieve at different points in their life. In the minds of these young people, they seem to have constructed a local form of the American Dream (see Gubrium, 2006; Gullette 2003), an economic life-course story (Gullette, 2003, p. 105). They are using this construction to frame their life stage and to describe the goals and responsibilities they have associated with given stages.

Commitment to family

During the interviews, participants frequently discussed commitment to their family. This is consistent with the teachings of Confucius espoused in China for thousands of years, a primary tenant being filial piety. The self according to Confucian tradition is filial in nature, the body itself having been physically derived from one's parents (Huang, 1999). The commitment to family is also in line with previous studies where reform-era urban Chinese young people were found to still cherish traditional filial values (see Liu, 2008b). Liu (2008b) found that young adult narratives related to filial duty were shaped by being a single child, and that young women were just as ready to support their parents in old age as young men were.

While strong, commitment to family had tensions associated with it. Participant narratives bounced back and forth between parents' high expectations to how much their parents loved them. Ryan shared the following:

You need to ask, what is your relationship with your son/daughter? Friend or investment?

In the West, a child is an individual. The parent thinks “I gave him life, we have some link.” In China I don’t think parents see their children like this, they treat us like possessions.... They are not selfish people, certainly not! Their children are their only hope. They live for their children.

This type of mixed sentiment towards parents was common. Ryan’s sense that parents in China think of their children as investments or possessions is consistent with observations that parents are eager to invest in their child’s future because the family is relied on for old-age support in today’s China (Liu, 2008b). While feeling pressured by familial responsibility, many participants spoke very highly and lovingly of their parents. The Post-80s participants also expressed feelings of gratitude for everything their parents had sacrificed to help them have a better education, life, and future. Although the family dynamics have been altered in the past decades through the Cultural Revolution and the One Child Policy, the Post-80s loyalty to family remains strong. They actively call on family-related resources in their self narratives.

Both the emotional commitment to family and the financial obligations are consistent with a collectivist culture. As Cooper and colleagues explained “the obligation to the family in collectivist cultures is financial. Resources are shared” (Cooper, Calloway-Thomas, & Simonds, 2007, p. 168). Collectivism has been defined as the subordination of personal goals to group goals with an emphasis on sharing and harmony. Here “group” refers to the in-group, in this case the family (Ralston, Egri, Stewart, Terpstra, & Yu, 1999). The narratives of the Post-80s participants did not necessarily show a subordination of personal goals, but rather an attempt to achieve personal and group goals simultaneously. Shared meaning structures, such as filial piety, while public cultural discourses, are always called on locally (Geertz, 1983). The Balinghou have

chosen to make filial obligation a part of their realities and are attempting to balance it with their individual goals. It remains to be seen whether they will achieve this feat, and whether future generations in China will incorporate the ancient tenant of filial piety when constructing their identities and life course.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to explore the narrative resources Shanghai's Post-80s young adults call on to construct their identities, given their unique historical positioning. I found the main resources could be classified as generational, structural, and personal. In some instances, the resources utilized were related to the individual's phase in the life course rather than unprecedented circumstances. Although the Balinghou's situation is unique, so have been the situations of generations before them and members of their birth cohorts around the globe. Even with external factors such as the One Child Policy and rampant economic growth and reform, the Balinghou do not seem to think of themselves as an anomaly.

My data show that that generational identity is closely linked with the life course and in particular that for the Balinghou the life course was called on to construct not only individual but collective identities. As argued by Gubrium and Holstein (2000a), the life course does not passively and sequentially unfold for the participants, but rather the Post-80s actively manage the process of their life course, assigning diverse meanings to its stages.

My research also points to the contingent usefulness of narrative inquiry across cultural contexts. Much of the analytical literature published in English that discusses narrative identity has called on work conducted in settings such as Alcoholics Anonymous and other support groups, court rooms (see Holstein & Gubrium, 2000b), or North American settings where open self narration is encouraged and accepted. In Chinese culture, where concerns for reputation are

high, the same level of openness may be difficult to achieve. Thus, it appears that the extent to which identity is narratively expressed can be deeply culturally constrained. Given this setting, as an ethnographer and narrative analyst, it is difficult to know whether participants are not telling you something or whether that something is not an important resource in their identity construction. A deeper engagement of narrative inquiry and symbolic interactionism across diverse cultural settings would provide much needed reflection on the applicability of key concepts, and likely extend this perspective in novel ways.

Finally, my research has shown how in their everyday life, Shanghai's Balinghou encounter a landscape of paradoxes; a communist political system with an almost capitalist market model, a collectivist culture combined with fierce competition, the pursuit of career versus the importance of family. Yet they navigate these opposing forces to construct the lives they and their families aspire to have, and while they do not reject traditional Chinese or foreign cultural influences, they do not readily embrace them either. The resources they call on for their identity construction are unique to the age and place they live in, but their perceptions of their life course and goals are familiar. While they could have embraced their difference, announcing "We are China's Post-80s generation, the world has never seen the likes of us!" they instead seemed to say, "We are just a generation, with dreams like any other." Due to their large numbers, financial resources, and potential power, the Shanghai Post-80s generation will undoubtedly have significant impact in our present and future world. This may be the first time my participants had their voices heard, but it certainly will not be the last.

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