

Reconciling New Confucian Values with Contemporary Realities: A Study of Generational Perspectives on Women's Independence, Marriage, and Career in China

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Abstract

Chinese society is experiencing a generational shift in attitudes, particularly concerning women's roles, values, and aspirations. Younger women in urban centers such as Beijing see themselves governed less by the older paradigm of filial and communal standards and more by modern ideals like economic independence and personal fulfillment. However, the assumption that this new generation is "materialistic" has obscured a more nuanced truth: Many younger women see financial security not as an end but as a pathway to autonomy and equality. Drawing on two large-scale surveys—first involving students and parents and subsequently a follow-up survey of predominantly Beijing residents—this paper explores how new attitudes toward Confucian values, wealth, and personal freedom have emerged. It compares old and new Confucian frameworks, highlights misconceptions between generations, and discusses the social ramifications of judging young people by outdated metrics. Finally, it proposes several recommendations for mitigating the growing tension, including more open dialogue between generations, reforms in education, and policy changes that acknowledge the modern, pluralistic reality of Chinese society.

Keywords: Women's Autonomy, Generational Shift, Confucian Values, Marriage & Career Attitudes, Economic Independence, Intergenerational Tension, Modernization & Tradition

Introduction

China's urban areas have undergone rapid economic growth and profound socio-cultural transformation in recent decades. Nowhere is this dynamism more evident than in the younger generation's attitudes toward marriage, family, and career. Confucian values have traditionally guided conventional Chinese family structures. It is difficult to argue that filial piety, loyalty to family, and social harmony have long been cornerstones of how Chinese parents (in particular, over 40) and grandparents understand a "proper" life trajectory for

their children. These older ideals often emphasized the collective good of the family over individual aspirations.

Today, however, that balance is shifting. Beijing's younger generation, often called the after-90s and 00s generation (especially women), are more educated, socially mobile, and exposed to global influences than ever before. Many want greater autonomy in approaching romantic relationships, marriage, and careers. Often, they prioritize economic independence and personal development. Older family members may view these priorities as materialistic or challenging deeply held values. Younger individuals, on the other hand, argue that without personal financial freedom, they cannot truly choose how to live or whom to marry.

This paper explores how divergent attitudes toward money, marriage, and Confucian values shape a new generational identity in China. While some scholars and commentators reduce the conversation to "greed" or "selfishness," we will show—through original survey data—that independence is the key driver of so-called "materialistic" attitudes. We examine two major surveys:

1. A Parents versus Students Survey conducted in multiple Chinese cities focusing on major urban centers such as Beijing highlights differences in attitudes toward marriage, childbearing, and career expectations.
2. A Follow-up Beijing-Centric Study that investigates how younger people—especially women born after 2000, or who identify with post-2000 values—actually perceive money, marriage, and Confucian ideals. This second inquiry asked if the quest for financial security might be rooted in deeper needs, such as autonomy and recognition, rather than simple materialism.

Using this data, we argue that China's urban youth—particularly in Beijing—are indeed developing or adopting what might be called "new Confucian values." Rather than discarding Confucian ideals altogether, many are adapting tradition to a modern environment that demands financial independence, personal choice, and the exercise of agency. The tension comes from applying older generational standards to a generation operating under dramatically different societal conditions—"winter clothes in scorching summer," as the mismatch metaphor suggests. This creates confusion, misunderstanding, and real social and familial strain.

This study was motivated by two pressing concerns: Firstly, the need to empirically verify whether young women's financial focus represents materialism or pragmatic independence in China's high-cost urban environments. Secondly, there is an urgent societal demand to reconcile accelerating modernization with cultural continuity, particularly as generational tensions manifest in family conflicts and demographic shifts.

Ultimately, this paper highlights why understanding new generational values matters. Suppose parents, educators, and policymakers continue to expect young Chinese women to conform to an outdated framework. In that case, it will hamper the younger generation's well-being and, ironically, clash with China's broader modernization goals. We offer several recommendations, from improved family dialogue to changes in educational curricula, that might begin to remedy these problems.

Literature Review

Modern Chinese society has witnessed a dynamic interplay between enduring Confucian values and the forces of modernization. Confucian ideals such as filial Piety, loyalty to family, and social harmony have long underpinned China's social fabric. For over two millennia, Confucianism was the state ideology reinforcing a patriarchal family system characterized by male authority) and female subordination (Hu, Guan & Yang, 2024). Traditional norms dictated that women obey their fathers, then husbands, and finally, sons, occupying domestic roles regarded as inferior to men's public pursuits (Xie, 1994).

These hierarchical values were formally repudiated after 1949, the new government actively promoted gender equality and collective welfare, pushing Confucianism and elements where men were deemed superior to women into ideological exile for decades and offering more equality (Hershatter, 2019).

However, with the onset of economic reforms in the late 20th Century, Confucian cultural influence resurged, regaining prominence by the 1990s as part of a broader revival of "traditional" culture (Lin, 2025)). This revival forms the backdrop against which contemporary gender roles and intergenerational dynamics are unfolding.

Intergenerational relationships are another domain where Confucian values are being reinterpreted under the forces of modernization. The Confucian principle of filial Piety—traditionally the foremost virtue—prescribed unwavering respect and care for one's elders. In contemporary urban China, the substance of filial Piety is evolving from one of strict obedience to one emphasizing mutual support and emotional closeness. Ethnographic research on only-child urban adults finds filial Piety has "transformed into a family ethic" based on more egalitarian inter-generational relations and intimate parent-child bonding. Filial Piety is sometimes presented as the most important among the 100 virtues (Sun, 2017). Younger generations value authenticity in their family interactions, preferring to express genuine affection and seek personal fulfillment even as they care for aging parents (Sun, 2017).

As a result, many young adults still feel a strong sense of responsibility toward their parents, but they interpret this responsibility in ways compatible with their individual life goals. For instance, rather than cohabiting with parents or unquestioningly obeying them, urban youth may practice filial Piety by maintaining frequent contact, providing financial support, and involving parents in their lives out of love rather than duty. This shift aligns with China's changing family structure under urbanization and the one-child policy: with smaller, more nuclear families, parent-child relationships have become more peer-like and focused on emotional reciprocity. At the same time, traditional expectations have by no means disappeared. Many elderly Chinese still consider it a grave breach of filial Piety for children to entrust them to institutional care; to be placed in a nursing home is often perceived by the older generation as abandonment. On the one hand, this might be a challenge with the quality of such homes themselves, as it is not wise to assume the quality of care is the same as that given by family; it is also an example of a clash between generations (Pufpaff, 2020).

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Such sentiments, widespread among the grandparent generation, underscore the tension between old norms and new realities. With rapid aging and fewer children to shoulder care, the practicalities of fulfilling filial duties are increasingly challenging the old model.

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Younger family members must find new ways to honor their parents—whether through regular visits, financial provisioning, or utilizing community eldercare services—while also meeting the demands of urban work life. Thus, the core Confucian ideal of intergenerational reciprocity persists, but it is being adapted to fit the socio-economic constraints of 21st-century life.

Empirical studies corroborate that China's younger generations have undergone a broad shift in values under modernization, even as they retain elements of Confucian familism. Survey research comparing age cohorts shows youth today prioritize individual aspirations far more than their predecessors. In a large study of Shanghai residents, Sun and Wang (2010) found significant generational gaps: younger cohorts had largely "shifted from traditional values to modern values," placing self-development and personal lifestyle choices above collective duties

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Compared to older people, Chinese youth are more individualistic and less bound by the traditional collectivist ethos – they are more inclined to "live according to their lifestyles regardless of what others think" rather than strictly upholding family or societal expectations

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This does not imply a wholesale rejection of Confucian ideals; the younger generation is renegotiating their relative importance in everyday life. Parents' influence is still evident in many young adults' major life decisions, yet the youth may tactfully resist or reinterpret parental guidance to suit their goals. Young women, in particular, face a dual mandate: the encouragement to excel in education and careers on one side and the enduring expectation to marry and uphold family continuity on the other. Research indicates that post-1980s women often "live in two seemingly contradictory worlds" – they pursue higher education and professional success thanks to modern opportunities, but they also deeply value family life and depend on family for emotional support

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Unlike their grandmothers, who were once constrained by an ideal of self-sacrificing female virtue, today's urban daughters strive to be both filial and independent. Many cherish close relationships with their parents and intend to support them in old age, yet they also assert their identity in marriage, work, and lifestyle choices. In short, the younger generation – especially educated urban women – are actively reshaping Confucian values. They preserve the spirit of filial devotion and communal harmony but often reject the rigid gender hierarchies and unconditional obedience of the past. Modernization has not abolished Confucian values in China so much as it has forced their adaptation into new forms compatible with a society in flux.

Research Gaps

Despite the extensive scholarship on Confucian values in contemporary China, several critical gaps remain. First, a notable lack of empirical research directly compares generational cohorts' adherence to and interpretation of Confucian values. While broad surveys have documented that younger Chinese are generally more individualistic and less tradition-bound than older adults

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Few studies have delved into specific intergenerational comparisons of core Confucian principles such as filial obligations or attitudes toward gender roles. Existing quantitative research tends to examine one generation in isolation or to use aggregate national data, making it difficult to untangle how much of the observed change is due to age, period, or cohort effects. No comprehensive study to date has explicitly measured and contrasted Confucian value endorsement across multiple generations within the same analytical framework. Consequently, questions about the magnitude and nuance of generational divergence in beliefs about filial piety or women's familial duties remain insufficiently answered. A more fine-grained, comparative survey approach – asking elderly parents and their adult children the same questions about family responsibility, authority, and personal autonomy – would significantly deepen our understanding of evolving intergenerational dynamics. The absence of such data leaves a gap in validating the often-assumed transformation of values: we surmise that a profound shift is occurring, but we lack robust longitudinal or cross-generational evidence to map these differences directly.

In summary, future research should strive to fill these gaps by employing methods that capture both generational contrasts and the firsthand perspectives of young women. Incorporating direct generational surveys and amplifying younger women's voices (through qualitative or mixed-method studies) will provide a more holistic understanding of how Confucian ideals continue to evolve. Such approaches can illuminate how tradition is preserved, adapted, or challenged in the daily lives of China's urban youth, particularly its young women, who quietly redefine what Confucian values mean in an era of rapid change.

Methodology

Survey 1: Comparing Students and Parents

Our first large-scale effort surveyed two groups:

- Students (largely those aged 12 to 21, though some respondents were older)
- Parents (majority aged 31 to 50, but extending up to 60 and beyond)

The questionnaire comprised various items on marriage attitudes, career expectations, filial Piety, Confucian values, and family roles. Notably, a high proportion of participants came from Beijing (over 70% in the student survey and nearly half in the parent survey), with the rest from other major cities (Shanghai, Shenzhen, Guangzhou) and smaller locales. This allowed us to capture some metropolitan versus non-metropolitan differences.

The survey asked about:

1. Marriage and Childbearing Attitudes:
 - Desired marriage age, if any
 - Importance of economic circumstances in marriage
 - Influence of parents in spousal decisions

- The perceived role of Confucian ideals (e.g., family continuity, filial piety)
- 2. Career Expectations:
 - Factors influencing job or career choice (interest, income, social status)
 - Perceptions about whether women or men face disadvantages in certain industries
 - Attitudes about the purpose of university education
- 3. Gender Differences and Confucian Values:
 - How participants perceive “traditional Confucian values”
 - How these values apply differently, if at all, to sons and daughters
 - Whether generational differences shape how these values are interpreted

Sample Sizes and Demographics

- Student sample (N=177): 13-17-year-olds constituted the largest subgroup, followed by 18-21-year-olds. This distribution allowed insight into teenage perspectives as well as those just entering adulthood. Females slightly outnumbered males (58.19% female, 41.81% male).
- Parent sample (N=265): The majority were between 31 and 50 years old (70.19%). Women made up 61.13% of the parent sample, men 38.87%.

Survey 2: Beijing Youth and Parents Follow-up

After analyzing the initial survey, we found that many younger respondents were intensely interested in money and financial security. Some had already flagged wanting more economic resources than their parents or guardians might have expected. We wondered: Is this materialism or a desire for autonomy?

To investigate more deeply, we designed a second questionnaire focusing on Beijing residents, both younger and older, to gauge:

1. How young people perceive money, marriage, and Confucian obligations in the context of greater personal independence.
2. Whether older participants see “materialism” or “greed,” or whether they comprehend the independence rationale.
3. Which aspects of Confucianism remain relevant to younger women in Beijing and which are being reinterpreted or discarded.

This second survey—labeled “Beijing Young People’s Values Survey”—contained demographic questions, items on money/financial success, attitudes toward traditional Confucian obligations, and open-ended questions about perceived generational change.

Notably:

- Respondents (N=263) included men and women of varying ages: 18–24 (10.27%), 25–34 (38.02%), and 35+ (44.87%).
- A significant focus was placed on how female independence and economic priorities interlace with or depart from Confucian frameworks.

Literature Review

Confucian values—filial Piety, loyalty to family, social harmony, among others—have influenced Chinese family structures for millennia. However, scholars note that Confucian ideals often evolve rather than vanish in times of modernization. For instance, many younger Chinese interpret filial Piety not as obedience but as mutual Respect and emotional support

for parents (Yan, 2010). In a high-pressure urban environment, fulfilling obligations might mean ensuring parents' comfort while pursuing personal goals (Fong, 2007).

Meanwhile, China's economic reforms have created a new social mobility. Young women, especially, can move to major cities like Beijing for better job opportunities, leading them to develop more individualistic mindsets. However, as previous research (Zhang & Sun, 2019) emphasizes, this individualism does not necessarily reject all Confucian ethics—instead, it reconfigures them to suit modern conditions. For example, independence can be paired with loyalty to one's family by ensuring that the family's economic burdens are shared—just not at the expense of personal freedom.

Even marriage norms have changed. Scholars (Ji & Yeung, 2014) have noted that the concept of marrying "early" or "by 30" can conflict with the realities of a competitive job market and the rising cost of living, especially in Beijing. Many younger women put off marriage in favor of stabilizing their careers and achieving financial security. Some older parents, however, regard "late marriage" as an abandonment of the communal good or a dereliction of family continuity.

Against this backdrop, the new data sets reported here help clarify why younger Chinese, particularly in Beijing, often place a high value on money but do so in ways that reflect deeper, modernized forms of Confucian or quasi-Confucian reasoning.

Results

First Survey: Parent–Student Contrasts

Marriage Attitudes

- **Students' Views:**

Among youth (ages 13–17, 18–21), a sizable fraction indicated that marriage would happen "naturally" when the time was right (42.94%). Another 14.69% explicitly stated they "do not support marriage," reflecting a non-trivial subset that sees long-term singledom or delayed marriage as acceptable. Notably, 16.95% saw external conditions (finances, family) as more decisive than personal desire.

- **Parents' Views:**

Parents of daughters often indicated no strict timeline but generally preferred marriage before age 30. In fact, 43.65% believed their daughter "should marry before 30," though 31.75% said there was "no time requirement" and 22.22% believed "no marriage is acceptable if she wants that." A smaller fraction (2.38%) explicitly wanted "the earlier the better."

This discrepancy highlights a more relaxed parental stance than might be stereotypically assumed, though the data still reveal parental hopes that children marry by a specific timeframe. Students, especially older teenage girls, increasingly question the necessity or timing of marriage.

Career Priorities

- **Students (Career Choice):**

A strong majority (64.97%) valued income highly when choosing a career, second only to personal interest (69.49%). Females and males largely shared these priorities. But female

students specifically expressed concern about potential disadvantages, with 23.73% saying “women are at a clear disadvantage” in high-paying jobs.

- **Parents’ Perspectives (Daughters vs. Sons):**
Parents indicated their daughters’ top career consideration should be personal interest (79.37%). Yet 23.02% also prioritized high income. Meanwhile, when focusing on sons, 67.88% emphasized personal interest, but over 30% specifically valued “high income.” Interestingly, parents expressed an even stronger desire for their sons to choose “natural sciences or engineering” (54.55%) as opposed to “humanities” (7.88%). For daughters, 29.37% favored natural or engineering sciences, 18.25% humanities, and about 20.63% favored public service roles.

In short, parents see a narrower future funnel for sons—technology or engineering—often tied to stable, higher incomes, while a broader set of paths is acceptable for daughters. Nonetheless, both parents and students attach considerable importance to salary.

Confucian Values

When asked about Confucian values—filial Piety, loyalty, social harmony—parents scored them as highly influential for both girls and boys. Students, however, were more divided. About 10% of the student group indicated that Confucian values had minimal impact. These results are especially relevant when cross-referenced with open-ended commentary, where younger respondents often said that while they respect their elders, they believe they must develop their path in life.

Second Survey: Beijing Young People’s Values

Because the first survey showed youth might be misjudged as “greedy,” the second, more Beijing-focused study looked deeper into money attitudes, especially among young women.

Money and Independence

- **Emphasis on Economic Success:**
62.74% of respondents (all ages) felt that “today’s younger generation values money more than previous generations.” Yet, in an associated question, 70.72% believe that young women’s emphasis on money is primarily about “achieving independence,” not greed.
- **Beijing Young Women:**
An overwhelming 89.35% agreed that Beijing’s younger women are more inclined to seek economic independence than older generations. Of these, about half (50.19%) said the reason was a combination of “escaping traditional family roles” and “raising personal living standards.”
- **Changing Marriage Patterns:**
Over half (52.85%) agreed that many high-income Beijing women might remain single permanently because they “believe they can only rely on themselves” and thus want even more income/security. Another 28.52% disagreed, believing plenty of women still seek marriage, but do so on their own timelines.

Continuing Influence of Confucian Values

Participants were asked which classical Confucian values they personally adopt and which they believe younger Beijing women embrace. The top picks included:

- **Ritual and Respect (礼仪与尊重):** 73% personally identified, while 66.16% believed young Beijing women also identify with it.

- Virtue and Integrity (德行与正直): 68.06% personally identified, 61.98% believed young women do as well.
- Filial Piety (孝顺): 68.06% personally identified, 48.67% believed young women follow it. This discrepancy—almost 20%—suggests that older or more traditional respondents assume younger women are less strictly filial, or may practice it in new ways. Meanwhile, 63.5% believed that young women “lean toward new values” of individualism and independence rather than being guided by old Confucian frameworks.

Emergence of a “New Confucian” Synthesis?

An interesting portion of the second survey asked: “Do you think Beijing’s young generation is actually creating a new set of values different from traditional Confucianism?” A majority (66.16%) said yes, with about 19.39% selecting “some combination of both.” When probed as to why, respondents emphasized:

- Globalization and technology (70.72%)
- Internal questioning of tradition (56.27%)
- Younger attempts to adapt or innovate (43.35%)

At the same time, participants recognized that many core Confucian ideals—like Respect for parents, a sense of moral duty, or courtesy—remain relevant, albeit reframed by younger individuals for a modern context.

Discussion

Are Younger Women Simply “Greedy” or “Newly Independent”?

One of the core questions fueling our follow-up study was whether a strong focus on money among young Chinese women in Beijing is best explained by materialism or a striving for autonomy. Our data consistently supports the latter.

- Students and Younger Adults: They do prioritize salary, but crucially frame it as an enabler of personal freedom and a hedge against uncertain social or family expectations.
- Older Parents: Many do not necessarily label these attitudes as greedy. However, they do worry about the spiritual or familial implications of such intense financial aspirations.

A direct conclusion is that, for a significant subset of young Chinese women, money is a means to self-reliance and not simply a pursuit of luxury or status. This aligns with how modern Confucian interpretations can converge with individualistic drives: young adults still value harmony and respect, but they believe that, if they are not financially independent, they cannot fully negotiate or influence the terms of their familial or marital relationships.

The Role of Confucian Values in Contemporary Attitudes

Our findings confirm that Confucianism is far from disappearing. Instead, it is undergoing a selective re-adaptation:

- Filial Piety Revisited: Youth are willing to show love and respect for parents, but they want that respect to be mutual. They challenge the notion that filial piety means always deferring to parental decision-making, especially when it comes to marriage choice or career paths.
- Loyalty to Family vs. Loyalty to Self: Younger individuals want to help their families financially, but they do not want to sacrifice their personal goals. In effect, they want to maintain “loyalty” but also to preserve individuality.

- Social Harmony in a Changing World: The older generation sees social harmony as following well-trodden paths and keeping conflict minimal. Younger respondents interpret harmony as open communication and forging new agreements that meet each party's needs.

The second survey's open-ended questions make clear that participants often see themselves as inhabiting a "mixed" moral universe. They do not fully reject Confucian ideals, but neither do they accept them in the same unconditional manner that older generations did.

Why the Generational Mismatch Matters

Social and Familial Friction

When parents or grandparents apply older standards to younger women's choices, misunderstandings ensue. For example:

- Marriage Pressure: Parents expecting a daughter to marry by 28 or 30 clash with a young woman who aims first for career stability.
- Career Choice Constraints: Sons and daughters might be encouraged or pushed into stable but perhaps unfulfilling fields. Should they "disobey," tension arises.
- Moral Evaluations: If older relatives label financial ambition as "greed," younger individuals feel unsupported or judged, escalating generational conflict.

Impact on Relationships and Well-Being

A mismatch of expectations extends to romantic relationships. Younger people might see marriage as optional, while an older generation might see it as essential. Some parents still consider "family name continuity" crucial, while many youth are open to being child-free or focusing on personal fulfillment. These differences can lead to guilt, anxiety, and a rupture in open dialogue.

Societal Implications

Contemporary China balances tradition with rapid modernization. A mismatch in values can stifle innovation, as younger workers might not fully channel their creativity if pressured to follow standard models of "success" or marriage. It can also lead to delayed marriages and lower birth rates, which in turn affect national demographics. Understanding and accommodating new generational values is thus not just a private matter but a strategic societal concern.

Recommendations

Given our findings, we propose a set of interventions aimed at bridging the generational gap and constructing a more supportive environment for young women—and young people generally—in China.

1. Encourage Family-Level Dialogues
 - Workshops or Seminars: Municipalities or NGOs could host intergenerational workshops on modern Confucian values, letting parents and children openly discuss marriage timing, financial goals, and career aspirations. Hearing from each other in a structured environment can reduce misunderstanding.
 - Media Campaigns: Positive media portrayals that clarify "economic independence" as an emotional and intellectual choice, not greed, can help shift older mindsets.
2. Revise Educational Curricula

- Contemporary Ethics Courses: Middle and high schools could offer courses or modules that explore how Confucian values might be adapted to modern realities, giving students an analytical framework to approach tradition.
- Career & Life-Planning Classes: Schools could facilitate open discussions on financial independence, marriage choices, and new forms of Confucian ethics. Parental engagement in these sessions can foster better alignment of expectations.
- 3. Support Systems for Young Women
 - Mentorship and Networking: Government or private organizations can set up mentorship systems pairing established female professionals with younger women, showing how independence, familial respect, and success can coexist.
 - Financial Literacy Programs: For younger individuals to be truly independent, understanding budgeting, investments, and property ownership is vital. This fosters clarity about money's role in achieving personal and familial goals.
- 4. Policy-Level Adjustments
 - Flexible Workplace Policies: Encouraging flexible work arrangements or parental leave that applies to men and women can reduce the stigma or burden often placed on young women. In a sense, sharing family responsibilities reaffirms social harmony in a modern context.
 - Public Acknowledgment of Diverse Family Structures: Public institutions and community organizations can include and validate single professionals, unmarried cohabiting couples, and other nontraditional family forms in official dialogues and local policy.
- 5. Further Research and Dialogue
 - Continuous reexamination of how Confucian values are practiced in major Chinese cities beyond Beijing (such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen) will help see if these trends are universal or region-specific.
 - Longitudinal studies tracking how "material" priorities evolve as these young adults age could clarify whether independence remains the core driver or whether other motivations eventually become more central.

Research Gaps

Three significant gaps in existing scholarship particularly informed our study's design. First, prior research has predominantly examined Confucian values through singular generational lenses rather than comparative parent-child dyads, creating analytical blind spots in intergenerational transmission. Second, most studies on women's economic empowerment have focused on workplace discrimination rather than how financial independence reshapes familial power dynamics. Third, while numerous studies document changing marriage patterns, few explore how young women cognitively reconcile delayed marriage with persistent Confucian expectations. Our dual-survey approach directly addresses these gaps by (1) deploying matched parent-child samples to trace value transmission, (2) investigating economic independence as a strategy for negotiating traditional obligations, and (3) capturing how young women reframe Confucian virtues to justify non-traditional life paths. This methodological innovation provides unprecedented granularity in understanding China's cultural evolution.

Conclusion

China is amid a profound generational shift in which younger citizens, especially young women, are wrestling with reconciling inherited Confucian ethics with new economic, social,

and educational realities. Our two-stage research, spanning parents and students in various Chinese cities and subsequently focusing on the Beijing metropolitan area, revealed substantial evidence that the new generation's focus on financial security stems from a more profound desire for autonomy, self-determination, and equal decision-making power—rather than simple avarice.

At the same time, these youths do not discard Confucianism altogether. Instead, they selectively adapt Confucian values to suit the modern context. They continue to respect virtues such as filial Piety, loyalty, and social harmony but reinterpret them through mutual Respect, personal freedom, and equality. The friction arises when older generations apply outdated metrics and label younger behaviors as moral failures or rebelliousness without recognizing the macro-level changes in the job market, educational standards, and personal aspirations.

If left unaddressed, these mismatched expectations can cause real harm, including strained family relationships, inhibited career development, and a rising sense of disconnection between the generations. On a broader level, ignoring younger women's new values may hamper China's strategic modernization efforts and further drive down marriage and birth rates. However, constructive, well-informed steps—in education, policymaking, or civil discourse—can ease tensions and allow families to find common ground.

In short, China's evolving society stands at a crossroads: older Confucian ideals must find ways to blend with a rapidly transforming environment. The younger generation's insistence on independence is not inherently rejecting tradition but an attempt to live up to modern challenges while retaining an ethical or spiritual framework. By updating how we interpret and apply Confucian values, we can reduce generational strife, empower young women, and cultivate a future that respects tradition and innovation.

The research makes two vital contributions to understanding China's social transformation. By empirically demonstrating that financial ambition serves as an instrument of autonomy rather than greed, we challenge dominant narratives mischaracterizing urban youth. Furthermore, we reveal how young women creatively synthesize economic independence with Confucian ethics - not through rejection but through principled adaptation - offering policymakers a framework for addressing generational divides without cultural alienation.

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