

London Review of Books

China's Millennials

Sheng Yun

A typical Chinese millennial hipster will turn up to see you wearing a snug designer jacket, really saggy jeans or super-tight leggings, and white sneakers. They'll be carrying an eco bag: not any old cotton tote, but one that's trending on Instagram – [the LRB tote](#) perhaps. Baseball caps and dramatic eyewear are among the most popular accessories. Unlike the urban middle-class generation that came before them, Chinese millennials (roughly, those born between 1985 and 2000) aren't particularly drawn to such luxury brands as Chanel, whose showy logo is considered too 'mature'. And they're reading Sally Rooney.

Chinese millennials are a product of globalisation. Like their Western counterparts, they don't much like traditional marriage arrangements. We have smartphones to keep us in touch with our friends, single millennials might say, unlimited games to play and movies to watch, dating apps for hooking up, an inexhaustible supply of porn for solo sex (it has been said that porn forums in China are the most harmonious spaces on the internet, with users thanking one another for sharing content), numerous apps for ordering cabs and housekeepers, restaurant delivery within thirty minutes, fresh grocery delivery within the hour, dogs and cats to channel the sporadic parenting instinct ... What do we need marriage for? In 2018, the marriage rate in China dropped to a new low of 7.2 weddings per thousand people; before that the divorce rate had increased for 15 years straight, to 3.2 per thousand. Two of the most commonly cited causes of divorce are disagreements over the division of household chores, and parental meddling – parents of only children can be extremely protective.

The most famous, or infamous, millennial in China is probably Wang Sicong, who was born in 1988, the only son of Wang Jianlin, owner of the Dalian Wanda real estate group and at one time the richest man in Asia with a net worth of more than £20 billion. With 45 million followers on Weibo, Wang Sicong is a social media celebrity. A photograph of him gulping down a hotdog became a viral meme last year, and he celebrated his e-sports team's win in the 2018 League of Legends World Championship by funding an online lottery to award 113 people 10,000 RMB (£1130) each – 23 million netizens took part. Educated in England (Winchester and UCL), Wang Sicong's style is in every way different from his father's, which is quite low-key. Wang Jr enjoys conspicuous consumption, showing off his private jet, his fancy cars, his dozens of girlfriends (who, incidentally, all look the same) and numerous pets – his chinchilla is named Putin. However, there is one subject on which he does agree with his father: in China, there can be no real success outside the system.

Most millennials are indifferent to politics. They grew up in the post-1989 world when China was at peace and enjoying double-digit economic growth. In *China's Millennials: The Want Generation* (2015) Eric Fish asks: 'Could the country's youth ever spark mass Tiananmen-like demonstrations again? Could their growing list of struggles ever cause them seriously to rock the boat? As they come of age, will they steer China in the direction of serious democratic reform, or will they carry on in the Leninist tradition?' I don't think millennials have either the drive or the incentive to take action: unlike former generations, they haven't been oppressed or wronged or mistreated. I have been interested to note the differing generational responses to Lou Ye's movie *Summer Palace* (2006), about Beijing students' experience of 1989 and its aftermath. My mentor cried when he saw it: he was a graduate student at the time and felt it was his story too. When I saw it, I 'got it', but I didn't cry because I knew it wasn't my story. When I asked the millennials in the office about it, they said the film didn't make any sense to them at all – they knew something horrible had happened back then, but they couldn't relate to it. People don't identify as idealists or rebels any longer.

In 2018, academics from Stanford and Peking Universities published a joint study titled *The Impact of Media Censorship: Evidence from a Field Experiment in China*. About 1800 students from two universities in Beijing took part in the experiment between 2015 and 2017. They were offered free software that would enable them to dodge the Great Firewall of China – which blocks almost all major Western news sites and social media outlets – and browse the internet without restrictions. There was some surprise when it turned out that even elite students in China had little interest in finding out what Westerners were thinking. Only 53 per cent of the participants had activated the software (even after repeated reminders), and about 14 per cent of the ones who had activated it uninstalled it shortly afterwards. Active users were browsing content which wasn't political. Only when there were quizzes with small cash prizes did the students visit the *New York Times* site or other suggested sources. When the free trial finished, the average renewal rate was low, and the users who did renew were more likely to use the software for Google searches or to access social media and entertainment sites rather than sensitive news.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Chinese dream (if there was one) was to go to America. Many firmly believed America was the most advanced and open country on the planet. 'The American moon is rounder than the Chinese moon,' we used to say, and becoming American meant that you had really made it in life. Now many of those who made it are beginning to have regrets. One of my childhood friends went to the US to study and has worked for a big Hollywood studio for more than ten years, but her anxiety has grown drastically in recent years, especially about her son's exposure to drugs at school and the rise of killing sprees. Now she is thinking of giving up the citizenship she worked so hard to get, and moving back to an authoritarian China where guns and drugs are strictly forbidden – at least her son would be safe.

Millennials have a less dramatic sense of things. Studying in the US or Britain is much easier than it was; if they aren't good enough to qualify for a scholarship, their parents can probably afford the tuition fees. (Or they can pay \$6.5 million dollars to someone like William Rick Singer, the man behind the US college admissions scandal, as one Chinese billionaire did to

get his daughter, who had below-average grades, into Stanford). Many millennials see studying and working abroad as a way of expanding their horizons; they don't necessarily believe the West is better. Even Chinese people who were educated and trained to admire the West from a tender age do not hesitate to defend the motherland in debates with self-righteous Westerners. They have no qualms calling for boycotts of companies or individuals who behave in a manner 'insulting' to Chinese culture.

Career choice distinguishes urban millennials from other generations: they are exceptionally entrepreneurial. My generation (those born in the late 1970s and early 1980s) were taught by our parents that a stable civil service job was the ideal, and that we should always keep saving for a rainy day. They went through harder times: stability and security are what they prize. Most urban millennials come from middle-class backgrounds, and as only children, they have always been shielded by their well-off parents. I know young people who drift continually from one job to another: as soon as they get bored or unhappy, they quit – they don't bother having a back-up plan. According to JWT Intelligence, 74 per cent of Chinese millennials say they would start their own business if they had trouble finding a job and 93 per cent agreed with the statement: 'Technology has put so many professional and entrepreneurial opportunities in front of me.' Millennials love to talk about fintech, AI, blockchains, robots and drones – anything that sounds edgy. Industry pundits agree that the next Silicon Valley will be in China; some claim that it's already there, but the Chinese Zuckerberg has yet to be identified. The founders of BAT – the Chinese tech giants Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent – were all born in the 1960s or early 1970s.

People who work at serious start-ups complain of '996' (staff work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week) and '007' (bosses work from midday to midnight, seven days a week). To urban millennials, many of whom aspire to be social media influencers, freelancing seems more appealing. The most popular topics on social media are food, travel, sport and pets. Those who manage to attract a large number of followers – and keep them – will soon have advertising companies, which have ditched glossy magazines for digital platforms and influencers, knocking on their doors. It seems that influencers can generate more revenue than celebrity endorsements.

The millennial attitude to the environment is a less straightforward matter. Most millennials are much more alert to global warming, ecodiversity and pollution than their parents were, and they love taking part in events such as Earth Hour, or raising funds for forest restoration. Many are vegetarians, and they worship David Attenborough. On the other hand, they are addicted to overseas holidays, which leave a large carbon footprint; to online shopping (usually packed in several layers of bubblewrap) and takeaway food (packed in single-use plastic boxes); and to fast fashion, which is another serious threat to the planet. China has refused to import foreign waste since 2018, which caused near panic in some of the biggest waste-producing countries (the US, and others in Europe). But now China produces more than enough domestic rubbish to keep its recycling plants working at full capacity.

The sharing economy was once celebrated as 'China's gift to the world'. In many cities, you could unlock a bicycle with an app, ride it to your destination and pay a small fee through the app. It was convenient and eco-friendly, until the day came when a photographer lit upon

tens of thousands of broken bikes piled up in a rural 'bicycle graveyard'. Other businesses based on this model are in deep trouble too. Car-sharing companies have failed to come up with a plan to guarantee the safety of customers after a number of lethal accidents. Airbnb started getting complaints from guests who found cameras hidden in their bedrooms. Millennials need to work harder at deciding what their contribution to the world amounts to.

When I was young, we didn't have much pocket money to spend on merchandise (Hong Kong pop was the thing). Cassette tapes were the only thing available to collect. Live concerts were rare and beyond the reach of middle-school students. Millennials, who have more money at their disposal, have been known to pay for full-page advertisements in mainstream Western newspapers – the *Times*, for example – to celebrate their idols' birthdays. Kris Wu, a major celebrity among Chinese millennials but virtually unknown to anyone else, suddenly swept to the top of the charts just before his birthday last year. It turned out that Wu's fans had been preparing the coup for months; it's called 'slaughtering the charts'. They raised a huge fund to buy as many US iTunes accounts as possible, using VPNs to change their IP addresses in order to bypass the iTunes purchase limits. Within five hours, seven of Wu's songs were outperforming Ariana Grande and Lady Gaga. The fans also figured out various ways to 'slaughter' Spotify, the Billboard Hot 100, the trending algorithms on YouTube and Twitter etc. The next time you see a strange name on the major pop charts, don't be surprised: tech-savvy Chinese millennials with money and time to spare are unstoppable.

The ACGN subculture – animation, comic, game, novel – has also grown increasingly popular with Asian millennials, who prefer the virtual to the real world. Spoofing, slapstick humour (*wulitou* or *mo lei tau* in Cantonese), cold jokes, *kawaii* (Japanese for 'cuteness') and zingers are essential to this culture. They particularly enjoy 'breaking the walls between dimensions', such as when John Oliver featured the unofficial Japanese city mascot Chiitan on his show *Last Week Tonight*. Chiitan had gone viral on Twitter after a few silly destructive stunts and *Last Week Tonight* sent a life-size John Oliver mascot to Japan to play with him. It was perfect entertainment for Asian millennials. Conan O'Brien becoming honorary mayor of Conan Town in Japan (the name is related to the famous Japanese manga *Detective Conan*) was a hit too. Millennials also love to augment videos in real time by sending out comments and jokes that fly across the screen as you are watching – the feature is called *danmu* or 'bullet chat'. It takes phenomenal energy and patience to watch a short video with viewers' comments racing across the screen and obscuring anything one might actually want to see.

Each generation has its own defining blockbusters and TV series. My college girlfriends watched *Sex and the City* in the dormitory and *Lord of the Rings* at the cinema. Millennials enjoy *Gossip Girl*, *Harry Potter* and Marvel's superhero franchise. Recently I watched *Avengers: Endgame* just to familiarise myself with contemporary cultural references. The millennials around me were weeping when Iron Man died (spoilers, by the way, are such a serious offence that you and your whole family will be damned if you give away an ending).

I suppose every generation has its own baggage. To be an urban millennial is to be in a state of constant anxiety about being left behind by technology, missing out on the latest lifestyle fad, or not getting enough likes for an Instagram post. Karoline Kan's recent memoir *Under Red Skies: The Life and Times of a Chinese Millennial* (Hurst, £20) explains in detail the

plight of rural millennials and how she struggled to become one of the lucky few. The rural girls who aren't so lucky end up in factories on minimum wage, while rural boys end up delivering food to millennials in the cities. The gap between social classes is already large; technology will widen it. The challenge for millennials now is to pick out the relevant signals amid the noise. The more complex the system becomes, the greater the possibility of meltdown. Are millennials prepared for a global systemic catastrophe? Or even a life without smartphones? They may not be. But then, who is?

[Vol. 41 No. 19 · 10 October 2019](#) » [Sheng Yun](#) » [China's Millennials](#)

pages 8-9 | 2510 words