

# **Cultural Transmission: Parent-Child Relations in a Changing Society**

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## **I. Raising of the Issue and Its Social Context**

Ever since the beginning of civilized society, no matter if the society in question underwent what kinds of changes, and irrespective of the differences in the content of cultural transmission and socialization, the direction of transmission and the role of the educator and the educated seemed fixed and unchanging. As far as the direction of cultural transmission was concerned, it was always from the older generation to the next younger generation. Correspondingly, within a family, the parents always played the role of educators and their children - the role of the educated. The temporal succession of the two generations in the chain of biological reproduction determined the inequality of both sides in societal education. In the process of societal education the statement that "the father exercises unquestioned authority over the son" might justifiably be regarded a basic law in cultural transmission in all civilized societies.

Nevertheless, this law and its rationality as an unalterable principle have gradually met with challenges since modern times. From the fifteenth century on, under the push of industrial revolution emanating from Europe, the modernization movements that spread throughout the world have immensely improved the material living conditions of mankind and brought about unprecedented changes in people's values, attitudes, knowledge systems, and patterns of social behavior. These changes are so profound and extensive that they have become increasingly visible since World War II, with the result that we may find manifest differences, estrangements, and even conflicts between two generations living in the world at the same time. As early as the late 1940s anthropologists and sociologists who showed immense interest in socio-cultural changes began to show serious concern in the phenomena known as the "generation gap." G. Gorer noted that because of migration to a new environment, the people of the paternal generation in the United States had lost the authority over their children that their counterparts in Europe enjoyed. This gave rise to frequent rejections of parents by their sons who were better adapted to the new life (Gorer, G., 1948, Chapters 1 and 2). Professor Fei Xiaotong, in his description of life in the latter half of the 20th century, touched upon the issue of sharp parent-child conflict engendered by the confrontation between new and old cultures (Fei Xiaotong, 1981, p. 117). From that time on, numerous monographs and articles have been published describing these conflicts or focusing on

the phenomenon of the "generation gap" in social life (Mead, M., 1970; Reich, C.A., 1970; Bates, I. & Riseborough, G., 1993; Norris, J. E. & Tindale, J. A., 1994; Zhang Yongjie et al, 1988; Zhou Yi, 1994).

The emergence of parent-child conflicts foreboded the crisis in the formerly unidirectional transmission of culture from father to son. Members of the parental generation had lost their absolute power in cultural transmission because of drastic social changes. Also both generations exhibited markedly different patterns in their respective abilities to adapt to change and the rate of speed at which they could adapt. Because of this difference in ability to understand and assimilate, members of the filial generation acquired unprecedented power to engage in the process of cultural feedback. Since World War II, it has been noted that "in an age of drastic social changes we have observed extensively the phenomena that members of the older generation are assimilating knowledge from members of the younger generation." (Zhou Xiaohong, 1988). Since China embarked on the path of reform and opening up to the outside world from late 1978 on, this phenomenon has been labeled by Chinese sociologists as "cultural feedback" and occurs extensively in parent-child relations in post-reform Chinese society. For instance, in an interview conducted by the author in this case study, a father (AF) in a private discussion about how to use computers, used an expression he deemed most convincing to rebut his colleague: "No, no, my son said.... "What a difference between this utterance and the classic reference to authority that we were used to quoting: "my father said .... "It might be said without any exaggeration that the mode of argumentation used by this erudite university professor of aesthetics not only proves the emergence of a new mode of cultural transmission, but even gives evidence to the emergence of an entirely new society. In an age when society has been so drastically affected by the computer revolution, the fact that a member of the paternal generation might willingly regard his or her son as his or her "teacher" of computer literacy is but one example that can be singled out among countless episodes that occur daily in a drastically changing world in which the relations between the two generations have been reversed or "subverted." Accordingly, we may, through description and analysis of a set of similar events or episodes, fully confirm the revolutionary changes that have occurred in the mode of cultural transmission within a family or even in the entire society. We can also observe the course of cultural changes in current societies in stark contradistinction to the course of cultural changes in previous societies.

## **II. Design of Research and the Acquisition of Raw Data**

Although the phenomena "cultural feedback" exists extensively in a drastically changing society, the study of this article is limited to the phenomena occurring within parent-child relations within families. This choice was based on the following for several reasons. First, within a specific family, the boundary between the "generations" is quite clear. This makes it possible for us to compare the values and social behaviors of members of the two generations with relative ease. Second, in view of the fact that the phenomena "cultural feedback" is relatively recent, and that this mode of cultural transmission sharply contrasts with that of the traditional mode, people might evade the existence of this phenomenon or might not be willing to recognize its existence. Therefore we deemed it more appropriate to conduct a qualitative analysis of this phenomena rather than conduct a quantitative analysis based on the findings of a large-scale questionnaire survey. Since parent-child interactions are quite frequent within a family, the use of qualitative analysis based mainly on the findings of interviews may enable us to acquire a deeper and richer fund of perceptual information on parent-child relations.

Based on similar considerations, we adopted the focus group interview method now quite popular (Hayes, T. J., and Tatham, C. B. , 1989; Morgan, D. L., 1989; Krueger, R. A. , 1994), that is, the members of several families with unique features in their parent-child interactions were grouped together in our interviews. We felt that this practice had several advantages. For instance, animated small group discussions with a variety of participants might provide the participants with useful stimulus, thereby arousing opinions and details of interactions that might be neglected in interviews with individuals. Also, from the perspective of parents and elderly persons, focus group discussions with many participants may more effectively inhibit the excessive seriousness emanating from those parents who have self-dignity considerations, a situation obviously unfavorable to intergenerational communications.

The raw data of this study is mainly derived from the findings of interviews with four focus groups involving nine families conducted in October 1998 and in August 1995. The interviews with the first, second and third focus groups were conducted in Nanjing in October 1998, all in the context of urban families. The fourth focus group interviews were conducted among members of the "Zhejiang Village" in Beijing in August 1995 and all the interviewees were "migrants" moving from the countryside to a large city. To make our description easier and clearer, we used the nine letters A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, and I to indicate respectively the nine families. The father, mother, boy and girl of each family are represented by F, M, B and G respectively, while the teacher of the child is represented by T. For example, the father (F) who is the university professor of aesthetics in family A is represented by the code name AF.

### **III. Discussions on the Phenomena of "Feedback" in Parent-Child Interactions**

We managed to conduct the interviews of the four focus groups in the freest possible atmosphere, and the moderator tried to do his or her best to enable each speaker to fully express his or her opinions. However, the focus of the interviews was made quite clear, that is, these discussions would center on the interactions between parents and offspring especially in regards to intergenerational cultural transmission. It was also made clear that the purpose of these discussions was to see if there had arisen a new mode of intra-family cultural transmission different from the traditional mode of parent-child transmission. The analysis and discussions of our findings obtained from the interviews will be conducted around four themes.

Theme 1: Is there the phenomenon of "cultural feedback" in parent-child interactions?

Based on the analysis of the findings derived from the interviews conducted in the four focus groups around this theme, we can clearly arrive at the following two conclusions:

Conclusion 1: Members of both the paternal and the filial generations all recognized that the phenomena "cultural feedback" does most certainly exist in this age of drastic changes.

From the findings of our interviews, almost all interviewees thought that in modern society, including one's own family, the phenomena of a parent asking advice from his or her child has become quite commonplace. Furthermore, interestingly enough, not only parents whose educational attainment was inferior to their offspring recognize that they are not as knowledgeable as their children, even parents with higher educational attainment also unanimously confirm the actuality and necessity of learning from their children. Among our interviewees there are two university professors, one 50, the other 44; both of them may be regarded as outstanding individuals among their middle-aged peers, yet they both recognize without any misgiving that their children often play the role of "teacher" in their lives.

In contrast with the "modesty" exhibited by certain parents, in our interviews the children of almost every family affirmed that their own capabilities did influence their parents. For instance, once we asked the son of a family engaged in garment processing ( HB ) if there was anything the parents were not aware of or if his parents had to ask advice from him, and his sister (HG) immediately interrupted to say that "there are many, many instances. If he is not here, our parents cannot stay in Beijing for a day. First, they don't understand what the people of Beijing say and don't know what kind of garments the people of Beijing are fond of. How can you do business in such circumstances?"

Conclusion 2: In pre-revolutionary China, there was little indication that parents learned from their children, but the periods around 1949 and 1966 were special times reflecting a vast

amount of social and technological change.

From our interviews we came to understand that in the contacts between the parents and their offspring, the direction of cultural transmission was as a rule along the path from parents to offspring, and there was no reverse impact exerted by offspring on their parents. However, there were exceptions to these phenomena. According to the recollection of interviewee FF, the "Great Cultural Revolution" initiated in 1966 was a special period. At the beginning of the "Great Cultural Revolution" everywhere could be seen big-character posters indicating the trend of the "cultural revolution" and posters revealing the inside stories of fallen personages. At that time his father was the principal of a suburban secondary school, and because his father had experienced a series of political campaigns such as the anti-rightist movement in 1957, he dared not enter the city to read the posters. Accordingly he often asked his son to report on the content of the posters and specific information concerning the "cultural revolution." Besides this, during the time when the author was gathering information relevant to this research, a retired university professor told him that the period around 1949 was also a special one. At that time, with the defeat of the Guomindang regime, the communists became the rulers of the mainland of China. In mainland of China there emerged many new things and new changes of various descriptions. These changes included how to determine class status, agrarian reform, the implementation of the new marriage law. There was also the movement against the "three evils" (corruption, waste and bureaucracy), and the movement against the "five evils" (bribery, tax evasion, theft of state property, cheating on government contracts and stealing of economic information) etc. "My parents knew very little about these things and could not understand them, but since I had taken part in the ' agrarian reform' work team, I was quite familiar with various policies, and accordingly my parents often asked my advice."

Theme 2: On what levels of social life does the phenomena "cultural feedback" appear in parent-child relations?

Having determined the extensive existence of the phenomena "cultural feedback," the second theme we focused on in our interviews was the question "on what levels of social life does the phenomena of offspring influencing and educating their parents occur?"

Conclusion 3: In questions concerning the difference between good and bad, and in value judgments on what is right or wrong, parents have also been influenced by their children, although these influences are less significant in comparison with other aspects.

In our interviews most members of the younger generation deemed it difficult to influence their parents' values, and the parents also took the view that the influence of their children generally didn't affect their own values and outlook on life. Yet under some particular

circumstances, parents also recognized that the influence of their children might touch the "depth of their souls." For instance, both parents of the family C were employed in the construction division of a relatively profitable big company. The father was a college graduate and earned a fairly good income. He naturally didn't feel much pressure at work having a perception that his situation was quite tolerable. Their 13-year old daughter attended a school far away from home, and left the home early in the morning and returned home rather late. One day, colleagues of her parents met her in the teeth of a windy rainstorm carrying a big satchel on her back, and asked her, "CG, is your commuting difficult or not?" Young as she was, she answered like a mature woman: "Ah, what to do? Everything is for the sake of survival!" Her father (CF) later said that "when I heard this utterance two feelings immediately surged forward in my mind. On the one hand I felt sorry for her hardship; on the other hand I felt that her words could encourage and spur both me and her mother on to constantly improve our professional competence, otherwise we would fall behind."

Conclusion 4: Children's understanding of society and human life, their views on consumption and money, as well as their aesthetic tastes and interest in life have all begun to affect their parents, causing the latter's attitude to life to undergo almost imperceptible yet real change.

In our interviews, almost all parents recognized that they were influenced by their children in regards to their attitudes towards life. These influences may be subsumed preliminarily under three aspects. The first would be an understanding of society and human life. According to conventional wisdom, parents usually have rich social experiences and are full of frustrations in their lifetime. Therefore their understanding of society and life should exert greater help to and significant impact on their children. However, today's children sometimes have an understanding of society and the new things and new issues emerging in the course of social changes that are more correct than their parents. Secondly, we can consider differences on views considering material consumption, spending and earning money. These are the points parents often grumble about the most in regards to their children. Despite the grumbling, during our interviews, we could discover that parents are imperceptibly changing their behavior, simultaneously accepting influence from their children, while they continuing to complain. A third aspect is views on aesthetic tastes and interest in life. The father of family G was a former pilot, and the mother an ordinary technical worker. At first they didn't like new-fashions, or western novels and movies, but they both have been influenced by their daughter, a graduate student of western literature. Now the mother has taken interest in the novels of various vanguard schools, and the father has come to appreciate very much famous current movies produced by American and European companies. GF

sighed with emotion: "In former times we could never read these novels and view these movies, since they were regarded as 'decadent or pornographic'; anyone who read or viewed them would be expelled from the Party and deprived of the right to fly."

Conclusion 5: It is a commonplace phenomenon that the daily behavior of parents is often influenced by their children, and that this realm of influence has become quite extensive.

Consumption behavior is a very important domain in which parents are often influenced by their children. Research findings indicate that the information provided by children for their parents not only includes data concerning the categories, designs, brands, characteristics, and prices of consumer goods, but also involves new consumption patterns and concepts. AM related that knowledge of newly marketed foods and beverages is mostly provided by the child AB. The parents of families F and G also confirmed that their acceptance of frozen food and salad dressing came from demonstrations provided by their children, and that their acceptance of such consumption patterns as inviting guests to a restaurant was directly brought about by their children. Teacher AT added that nowadays in secondary schools some female teachers are so busy and out of touch with current fashions that they do not know what to wear at all, yet the girl students are quite sensitive to fashions and know how to be in style. Consequently the students often serve as "fashion models" for their teachers.

The influence exerted by children on the daily behavior of their parents includes the provision of common knowledge in such areas as health care, domestic cookery (especially the preparation of new foods), traffic rules, methods of handling household electric appliances, and other topics of relative importance to modern domestic life. In the families of immigrants, children provide important information on topics including roads, business networks, and travel and tourism.

Conclusion 6 ~ The "power of discourse" of children finds a prominent expression in the use of new appliances and in the knowledge of new trends. It is here that parents' acceptance of children's "advice" is almost unconditional.

As far as parents are concerned, computers constitute their "Waterloo" in life. Among the nine families we contacted in our interviews, four have PCs. Not one of the parents of these families ranging from 38 to 50 in age dares to say his or her knowledge of computers is superior to his or her children. The father of family F is a professor of sociology and usually has original views on various social problems, but is at a loss when faced with the problem of upgrading the software of his computer. In contrast to FF, AF, a younger professor of aesthetics is proficient in English and rather diligent, and his knowledge of computers is rather good compared to his peers. He is able to use the computer to write, handle page make-up, print, access the Internet, and send

e-mails. Yet even with such a high level of computer literacy, FF has to ask his son (AB) to help him with tasks such as selecting appropriate software, downloading documents, creating a web page, or logging in. Here he candidly acknowledged his inferiority to his son and said, "I am not the only one inferior to one's son. You see whenever the department of the university undertakes to install a PC for a faculty member, it is invariably the faculty member's son who makes the configuration option concerning the choice of types of CPU, CD-ROM, MODEM, and the size of memory and hard disk." Indeed, in regards to computers, it is no exaggeration to say that the role of a parent is what the former pilot GF described it: "They (referring to children) dictate the configuration of the computer, and we are responsible for paying the bill only."

Besides computers, in regards to such new devices as VCDs, sonic equipment, pagers, cellular phones, fax-machines, scanning machines, and even microwave ovens, air conditioners, television sets, cassette recorders, etc., the knowledge of parents and their manipulative skills all fail far behind their children. Family H of the "Zhejiang Village" is equipped with a cellular telephone handset, but the parents don't know how to use it, they can communicate with it only after their son or daughter has demonstrated the correct buttons and codes.

Theme 3: Where does the children's capability of "feedback" or their "power of discourse" come from?

Cultural feedback is a unique phenomenon emerging in our modern society and is characterized by highly prosperous material production and drastic social changes. Therefore its emergence is, on the one hand, related to the physical and mental characteristics of both generations, and, on the other hand, it is the creation of a fast changing age.

Conclusion 7: The fact that social changes are intensifying and that new things and new rules are emerging one after another often makes the parental generation's knowledge, experiences, and even value judgment lose their interpretative power and value of transmission. It also often enables the filial generation to acquire for the first time the opportunity to "advise" their parents. This is the macro-level backdrop of the phenomenon of "cultural feedback."

The momentous changes in Chinese society during the past two decades have attracted worldwide attention, and these changes have brought the older generation into the modern era at a very high speed. Although this has helped them to realize many almost extravagant dreams, at the same time, a great deal of the knowledge and experiences that they acquired during their lives has been rendered obsolete. This situation has made many of them feel that they are the first-ever generation unable to leave any spiritual "legacy" to their children. During our interviews, many parents expressed regrets that their youth was wasted a great deal, and that they failed to learn when given certain opportunities. Now that their children are now living in a golden age of reform



and "opening up," it is quite natural and inevitable that their children should surpass them.

Conclusion 8: Facing the same drastic changes, members of the parental generation often feel constrained by tradition and experiences, while members of the filial generation are more easily influenced and have more capacity to assimilate new things. This is the inherent reason why there exist differences between the two generations in understanding and accepting new things.

The causes of backwardness in the parental generation are many. With the advance of age, their attitudes toward life and patterns of behavior tend to become stereotyped and they tend to pay less attention to new things. In particular, the parental generation that had seen its formative years in the conservative and closed social atmosphere prevailing in the years before 1979 is often handicapped by an uneven education and low proficiency in foreign languages. As a result, many are unable to assimilate constant emergence of new knowledge and changing culture. Finally, and this could be the most important point, almost all interviewees are of the opinion that the constraints of tradition and experience constitute the major reason why members of the older generation find themselves handicapped in their assimilation of new technology and new trends.

In contrast, that the filial generation possesses a "cultural advantage" is partially due to the fact that the younger generation is unlikely to be constrained by old traditions and knowledge. For the older generation, the emergence of new knowledge, which contradicts old experience, can be hard to accept and absorb but for the younger generation with minds unshackled by old ideas, new knowledge is a matter of course. Furthermore, members of the new generation are highly curious and are favored by their ability to quickly assimilate new things. They also often have a much better basic education ( it is recognized by all parents that their educational attainment falls short of that of their children at least by 5 school years), a factor enabling them to adapt to new things quickly.

Conclusion 9: The association of the filial generation with their peers constitutes one of the important avenues for acquiring new knowledge and new values. Therefore, peer groups have become the knowledge "reservoir" or the "expanded memory," which members of the filial generation take advantage of in order to affect or give "feed back" their parents.

During our interviews, the four children of the two families H and I living in Beijing's "Zhejiang Village" mentioned that their association with peers of a similar age constitutes a major route to their understanding of society, the market and the native dialect of Beijing. The eight children of Nanjing's seven families unanimously affirmed that their contacts with fellow students constituted one of the sources of their knowledge and information. It might be said that for these young and intelligent people full of curiosity and hungry for new knowledge that their social network which grows like an arithmetic progression has given rise to a rich fund of knowledge

and information that grows like a geometric progression. This state of affairs has engendered a situation in which the parents are not only socially connected with their own children, but through their children parents also network with the peer group of their children. This constitutes an inexhaustible reservoir of knowledge, which provides "cultural feedback" back to the parents.

Conclusion 10: The popularization of computers and the extensive influence of the mass media have for the first time enabled the filial generation to acquire knowledge and information from channels other than their parents and teachers. These new sources of information constitute the most important means by which children acquire the capacity to provide "feedback" to their parents and obtain the "power of discourse" in their interactions with their parents.

Except in regards to knowledge and skills acquired through personal experience, members of the filial generation are generally not producers of new knowledge and information. Beyond that acquired through schoolwork, their sources of additional knowledge and information mainly come from the mass communications media, including newspapers, magazines, radio broadcasts, and especially TV programs. Furthermore, since the advent of the 1990s, an ever-increasing number of PCs have entered the homes of ordinary urban families. Children who sometimes seem as if they have been mentally grafted to computers now can take advantage of access to the Internet and can acquire even more knowledge and information from web sites located even in distant countries. It might be said that since children are adept at manipulating computers and relatively proficient in using English, that they basically monopolize the "power of discourse" concerning access to the Internet and the acquisition of information from it.

Theme 4: Views on and appraisal of the phenomenon "cultural feedback" expressed by parents and their offspring

The emergence of the phenomenon "cultural feedback" and the constant expansion of its scope has enabled the younger generation to acquire unprecedented imaginative and creative power. At the same time, this situation often places the parents who are older and more able to handle family matters, in an awkward position. It is their responsibility to educate and foster their children, yet this is a responsibility which has become increasingly difficult to shoulder because of the conditions of modern society. How then should we consider and appraise this "reverse" in the conventional way of cultural transmission labeled "cultural feedback?"

Conclusion 11. Generally speaking, the "cultural feedback" provided by the filial generation back to the parental generation does not affect adversely parent-child feelings. However, it does alter the original pattern of parent-child relations, especially in raising the status of the filial generation in the family and enabling them a greater say in family affairs.

Whether parents can calmly accept the "cultural feedback" of their children and whether or

not they feel pressure when they are advised by their children constituted one of the central topics in our interviews. The parents of nine families, including the parents of the two families living in Beijing's Zhejiang Village which had moved from the Wenzhou countryside (the mother of one family was absent) all unanimously expressed the opinion that children will surpass their parents and that this is evidence of social progress. Thus, there is no question of losing face, and "cultural feedback" need not cause parents to be unhappy.

Nevertheless, despite the assertion of parents that listening to the "advice" of their children doesn't deprive them of their original status and dignity, the results of our interviews show that "cultural feedback" has, to a large extent, quietly changed the relative status of parents and offspring. In other words, "cultural feedback" has inevitably enhanced the say and decision-making power of children, even minor children. Nowadays, in many families, in matters concerning the purchase of daily necessities or collective actions, not only are the opinions of children are solicited, but frequently these matters are left solely to the children to decide.

Conclusion 12: The "cultural feedback" provided by the filial generation not only enables the parental generation to understand a lot of knowledge formerly quite unfamiliar to them and widen their horizons, but also serves to actually improve their ability to adjust to social change.

If we say that the emergence of the phenomenon "cultural feedback" only serves to raise the status and say of children in their families, we must also note that too much attention to "cultural feedback" does an injustice to the parents who have brought up their children amidst many hardships. Actually, this new type of cultural transmission, while providing children with self-confidence, knowledge and power, at the same time widens the field of vision of parents and improves their ability to respond to a world that is growing ever more unfamiliar.

#### **IV. Brief Concluding Remarks**

Studying the changes in the age long patterns of cultural transmission by observing the interactions between parents and offspring has enabled us to clearly understand the characteristics of the movements of rapid socio-cultural changes occurring in contemporary society in sharp contrast with those of previous societies. Speaking more concretely, the drastic changes in contemporary society involving human values, systems of knowledge, attitudes toward life, and the patterns of social behavior are no longer the simple continuation of the process of socio-cultural changes characteristic of pre-industrial societies. It must be observed that really revolutionary leaps or turns have occurred in between the times.

However, it must be pointed out that our discourse on "cultural feedback" doesn't negate the role and significance of socialization in general or the role and significance still played by the

traditional pattern of cultural transmission. Our hope is that this paper will draw the attention of the public to a new type of cultural transmission that until now has not drawn the attention of society. "Cultural feedback" is the product of a changing society. It indicates that the unidirectional pattern of cultural transmission is moving toward bidirectional or even multi-directional patterns of cultural transmission in contemporary society.

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