Introduction

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Abstract

In this introduction to our volume on growing up in Asian societies, we define the claim of this collection, explain the approach, and take stock of what it has been possible to achieve empirically and conceptually for the further global study of childhood and youth. Our aim was to understand and present the young generation in its intergenerational relations. The 16 studies, divided into four regional sections, show a broad spectrum of very different conditions in which this young generation lives, of expectations with which they are confronted, and of strategies for action that are open to them. And they show the overriding importance of the commitments and solidarities between different age groups across societies. We propose – in the sense of a theoretical conclusion – three concepts that should be central to the study of childhood and youth experiences: *(inter)generational order*, *existential inequality*, and *voice*. Whereby, the latter concept also has to take into account walls of silence. The three concepts have extended prior work of childhood and youth studies with new analytical power and empirical relevance, based on this most comprehensive collection to date on growing up in Asian societies.

Keywords: Intergenerational order; existential inequality; children's voice; young generation; intergenerational obligations; migration

This volume is committed to the empirical analysis and grounded theorization of childhoods and coming of age contextualized in the social, cultural, and economic realities in Asian societies. In this way, we pursue the ambition not only to

The Emerald Handbook of Childhood and Youth in Asian Societies, 1–12

doi:10.1108/978-1-80382-283-920231001

describe the multitude of childhoods and their variegated articulations and changes on a continent where the majority of the world's young people live, but also to question and in this way to elaborate established concepts and analytical frameworks in existing childhood and youth research formulated by researchers predominately based in Northern institutions.

Sketching the Project – Asian Childhoods and Youths in Context

More than half of the world's children grow up in Asia, a continent of rapid economic and social change. Undoubtedly, *there are many differences and enormous inequalities in the conditions of growing up in different countries, regions, and among social groups*. They are conditioned, among other things, by the respective economic situation, particularities of the education system, the varying existence or emergence of welfare state structures, and the different numbers of children born or aspired to have in the families, and a stronger or weaker presence of international organizations. Finally, the countries have aligned their laws and legal practices with international standards – especially those of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – to a different extent. It is precisely the complex interplay of such local and global conditions and private and public actors that is examined in this volume and its effects studied. These effects can offer advantages to the young generation but also impose considerable disadvantages and hurdles.

These childhoods nevertheless have *one important thing in common: it is the way and the extent to which the generations stay or are supposed to stay connected throughout their lives*. A strong obligation to support the parents, with material benefits and services of care and with the normative expectation to pay obedience to them, binds the young generation to the family. It is often referred to as "filial piety," though different terms apply in different Asian countries and different realities of intergenerational obligations are worked out – collectively and individually. For all these differences, however, strong intergenerational obligations are something that significantly shapes the lives of young people not only at or after the transition to adulthood. Rather, childhood and youth are already characterized by such solidarity between the generations. And time and again, connections to gender can be discerned: different decision-making guidelines, freedoms, requirements, and parental investments for sons and daughters. The descriptions and analyses of growing up in Asian countries that this volume gathers revolve around further aspects, too: global promises and challenges and their impact on hopes for the future; expectations of outstanding success that offspring may face and that children also hold for themselves; the normative linkage of (paternalist) family and nation and children's and young people's obligations to both; and the overwhelming gratitude that young people may express to parents – to name just a few that recur in the studies.

The tradition underlying these childhoods is an aspect that often receives special attention in academic and political discourses on young lives in Asian countries. In the studies in this volume, however, tradition is not of primary

interest and it is not taken as a stable foundation and fixed starting point. Instead, tradition is reflected in its constant reworking and, above all, in the references made by the actors when it comes to the reproduction or modification of childhood patterns. The exploration of childhood and youth in Asia is based on this very *interest in constant change*. In this sense, there is no intellectual juxtaposition of tradition and modernity, but rather the thesis that generational relations are in constant revision, that there is a universal need to rework such relations, to normatively reestablish them in response to economic and political change. It is precisely with such attention to reworking that Asian childhood and adolescence become interesting: *these are countries with – in very different constellations in each case – particularly rapid economic change, with political transformations, and with mass migration*. The latter then opens up the possibility of studying the revisions in emigrant groups, which is also what some of the studies gathered in this volume do. And in doing so, the contributions reveal the most diverse forms of migration: internal migration, migration across borders, migration of parents and thus so-called "left-behind children" but also migration of children, and thus "left-behind parents," and finally return migration.

When we try in this volume to show some facets and some commonalities of growing up in Asian countries or in the Asian diaspora of different countries, *much space is given to the voices and the contributions of young people*. We consider this an important perspective as the expectations held toward young people from their families but also from public/state actors are tremendous. Their families' high expectations may deviate from the *young people's own future prospects* to varying degrees, causing implicit tensions and explicit demarcations that can lead to *conflicts between the generations*. Nevertheless, young people's success can be considered a "joint venture," a shared interest of both young and old generations with considerable contributions of everyone involved but also varying degrees of vulnerability. From children to young adults, they have had the opportunity in many of the assembled studies to introduce themselves, to present their current joys and sorrows, their future dreams, and as well their fears of failure.

Having thus staked out the claim and approach of the present volume, we will present in more detail the main concepts that readers will encounter in many of the following contributions. In doing so, we will also elaborate on these concepts theoretically. We will show how these concepts should be reconfigured for further analysis of childhoods and youth in Asian societies and thus what childhood and youth studies can gain by studying growing up in Asian societies.

Key Concepts of this Volume

The Young Generation and (Inter)generational Order

We address children and youth with the notion of the young generation and we point to the strong connection and obligations between the generations; several chapters also use the term generational or intergenerational order. The term "generation" needs some clarification in regard to the scientific tradition and as

well in regard to the meaning it can have in our research contexts. The term has several connotations, both in everyday life and in science, which Kertzer (1983) has already admonished about. The oldest meaning is the one of kinship descent, either in the sense of parent–child relations or larger kinship relations. In public discourses and social sciences, the term has additional meanings. Most often, it refers to cohorts (individuals being born or confronted with important events in the same time interval) but as well to life stages. Social scientists have often used the term to refer to various meanings simultaneously. And already the classics of sociology are not in agreement on whether a new generation poses a threat to the social order (Durkheim, 1925) or represents a hope for a better future (Mannheim, 1959) or whether this is only about a phase of life to make the transition from family to institutionalized society (Eisenstadt, 1956).

It is probably due to such hope and fear that the term and at least the idea of a somehow uniform young generation are taken up again and again in youth research (Bristow, 2016; Strauss & Howe, 2000; for a critique of the assumption of generational unity: Duffy, 2021). The young generation is then conceptualized and studied as a separable segment of society with certain value orientations and culturally uniform preferences. Such research on youth and young adults as a definable "new" generation also exists for Asian youth. Studies on the "new" generation in Asian countries have often found a largely conservative orientation among youth or young adults, i.e., nationalistic attitudes, a rejection of ethnic minorities, and negative attitudes toward homosexuality; however, time and again, studies report on some groups or youth culture movements that deviate from the mainstream society (e.g., for Southeast Asia: Woodman et al., 2021; for Japan and Taiwan: Tsai & Yi, 2022; for Central Asia: Kirmse, 2013; Rakisheva, 2017; for Arab and Turkish Youth: Schäfer, 2015).

In contrast to such a rather delimitative concept of generation, taken from Western scholarship, especially from Western youth studies, the concept of generation in this volume is a fundamentally relational one. The notion is understood as one that always already refers to the other generations, that always already conceives of generations as parts of a *social fabric of age groups* with mutual obligations, publicly and above all also with regard to family and kinship. Thus, there is no claim in the studies assembled in our volume to draw the contours of a "young generation" sharply and certainly not uniformly. Unlike the sociological classics, in our understanding both euphoric and pessimistic expectations of the next generation but also the understanding of it as a mere transitional phase are inappropriate.

For a relational understanding of the concept of generation, Leena Alanen has made an important preparatory contribution. Alanen and Mayall (2001) introduced the term "generationing" into childhood research and took it to be a key concept for a relational approach to understanding children and childhood, insisting that relations between children and adults are constantly worked on and (re)defined – what makes up the members of the two age categories and what they can expect from each other. Alanen (2009) calls the relationship between the age groups (which is fundamentally asymmetrical in terms of rights and duties) worked out in this way a "generational order" (2009, p. 159). This is done in

deliberate analogy to the concept of "gender order," since these two social categories, children and adults, would be defined in relation (and in opposition) to each other, just like the categories of feminine and masculine (p. 160).

However, Alanen's concept of generational order remains limited to a juxtaposition of adults and children and does not yet take into account what is so important for Asian societies, that such an order is worked out not only between children and adults but throughout life and also between already adult children, possibly themselves already parents, and their parents. It is this social fabric between all age and generational groups – with their respective different rights and responsibilities – that binds individuals in Asian societies. Cole and Durham (2007) have made such a notion, with great profit, the guiding principle of their anthology *Generations and Globalization*, in which they address studies from various countries in the Global South. It makes sense when Xiaorong Gu (Section Introduction to East Asia, in this volume) varies the notion of generational order and speaks of *intergenerational order*. This linguistic variation might suggest that the term is to be understood here in terms of a whole *web of obligations* rather than as a binary juxtaposition.

It is impressive how much the anticipation of the relations between the generations, as they will exist throughout life, also influences the relationship between the children (in childhood) and the adults (Bühler-Niederberger, 2020). For example, in Western countries a "categorical imperative" exists: children must "become themselves" (de Singly, 2009, p. 108), must discover their interests and very special talents (Lareau, 2003; Schaub, 2015; Vincent & Ball, 2007), and this is especially true for the middle classes. Meanwhile, in the studies presented in this volume the integration of the child in the family and kinship context takes precedence. This integration takes place not only through frequent contact but also through mutual support, and the child is given an active role in this. And likewise, the peer group, which is so central to the Western youth research, takes on a different meaning in the contexts of our studies in which participation in the peer group must be balanced or is limited by strong family involvement, by the pressure to perform that a strong success orientation entails (Bühler-Niederberger, 2020; Gu, 2021), by the lack of extrafamilial spaces in which adolescents can and are allowed to move, by the influence of parents on central life decisions such as professional career or marriage, by early marriages in some countries, etc. All this shows how much the specific social fabric of age groups, the intergenerational order, shapes the lives of young people.

However, children must not be understood as passive, at the mercy of generational obligations. We have already pointed out that the child is intended to play an active role in the creation of intergenerational relationships. They perform this role and not only in the sense of a mere reproduction. They work on the social relations in which they live; they also criticize them and design their own plans for the future. In some of the presented studies, this is more evident, in others less so, but as far as the voice of children and young people was heard, they did not experience themselves as powerless, and even if they named limits to their scope of action and even if they deplored them, they nevertheless also strove for (partial) change. Yes, these generational commitments have a tradition, and this tradition

is occasionally referred to, but that does not mean that they are not constantly worked on by those involved – and especially by adolescents. In this respect, our notion of an intergenerational order also differs from the concept of collectivist societies (e.g., Triandis, 2001). In the latter concept, the collectivist norms tell the individuals what they have to do, and what their desires have to look like, and the norms direct the program. The intergenerational order, however, must be understood as something that is constantly produced by the participants, which is also varied according to the circumstances and thus always reacts to further social change. Consequently, there are other differences to the earlier notion of collectivist societies to consider. In several of the here assembled studies, for example, the strong success orientation of young people and parents with regard to their offspring stands out. This is something that, according to Triandis' distinction between collectivist and individualist societies, would have to be assigned to the individualist societies. And undoubtedly also surprising is the strong migration orientation, which stems not only from the pure struggle for survival but also from the desire for social advancement. And all in all, it is remarkable how often the young people refer to their own wishes and deal with them and their possible or impossible realization. This insight, which departs from the traditional scholarly assumption about collectivist versus individualist societies, also proves that it is worth listening to the voices of young people.

Existential Inequalities

The concept of inequality has become a frequently used one in research on growing up and is used above all to address differences in educational success and thus in life chances. In this concept it is quite naturally presumed that the educational systems studied allow everyone to participate in them, even if the inequality complained of consists in the fact that not everyone is equally well equipped to succeed due to students' socioeconomic status differences. The "socio-economic gradient" is said to differ in strength and slope in different societies (OECD, 2019). With such an understanding of inequality, a social structure is suggested as the norm and reality of any society, in which all members in principle have access to the same rights, to the same resources and positions, according to their ability. However – and this is the second assumption in this understanding – socioeconomic disadvantages have crept into this competition as a kind of flaw, disadvantages which are then primarily mediated through the education system. Despite this – as the formulation of a "socioeconomic gradient" suggests – they all move on the same curve, on which distance and slope can be empirically measured.

Whether this picture applies fully to any society is questionable, but, in any case, the majority of the studies included in our volume show that this image of what we might call a "competitive inequality" is even completely inappropriate. For the inequality we find here is not the one that concerns only the probability of attaining the top positions or promotion to the higher strata in a society, i.e., the competition on which, for instance, a debate about the so-called "meritocratic

illusion" focuses (e.g., Littler, 2017). So, we are not talking about competitive inequalities; we are instead talking about *existential inequalities*: the variety of childhoods that appear here – by gender, by ethnicity, by class, by caste, by urban-rural origin, by region, etc. – is of an existential scope that demands a different understanding of the concept of inequality. It is a matter of fundamentally different entitlements of access to resources and participation in the respective societies and hence fundamentally different entitlements to the possible well-being that are meant here. This starts with the different right to be together with the family (for instance, where migration is existentially enforced) and it is significantly mirrored in the conceded participation in an increasingly global education and labor market. These existential inequalities are created by traditional hierarchies to the disadvantage of certain population groups, which were then also created or reinforced in the course of colonization. However, it should be noted that economic conditions and thus the conditions of growing up in most of the countries reported on in this volume have improved significantly in recent decades. But even rising prosperity does not guarantee that inequality will be leveled out. Existential inequalities have also been generated by new opportunities, by economic developments, and by migratory movements that disadvantage the newcomers, deprive them of citizen rights, and place them in extremely vulnerable positions.

Finally, and paradoxically, deliberate attempts to open up new educational chances for the younger generation have created new inequalities at the meantime. One can think here of an international education market to which access can be made possible through international scholarships, but which remains completely inaccessible for large groups of the population; for others, this is associated with enormous efforts and great sacrifices. It is also about a normative pattern of "good childhood" that is spread worldwide and is to be implemented through global and national political (mostly still insufficient) efforts: a pattern of an intensively cared for and supported childhood. In its demanding nature, however, such a pattern cannot be implemented by some groups at all and by others, however, with maximum use of different kinds of capital – and between these two extremes lie the most diverse shades of more or less serious disadvantages. This does not necessarily argue against such attempts to open up new opportunities, but it does call for further care and increased effort in their implementation.

It is reasonable to question whether the concept of inequality – which assesses differences on a common scale – still makes sense in the face of such fundamental differences. We think, however, that children's rights and globally widespread notions of human and civil rights have in the meantime created a uniform benchmark by which the qualities of childhood are measured and judged. Not least, in some of the studies presented, the children themselves apply such globally mediated yardsticks when, for example, they assess their access to education or when, for all their attachment to their family networks, they express demands for self-determination more or less clearly. When differences are measured against a common yardstick, they become inequity. This justifies the concept of inequality, to which we add an adjective: existential inequality.

Voice as an Analytical Concept

Restoring the agency of children and "hearing the voices" of children have become central commitments of childhood sociologists to rightfully break away from the dominant adult-centrism in the discipline of sociology and social sciences at large. Indeed, as editors and authors of this volume, we share a concerted effort of bringing the voices, perspectives, actions, and reactions of young people in Asian societies and diasporas to the forefront of understanding their family life, intergenerational negotiation, and broader local and global social changes.

And our effort is not merely a positional one. We are aware of the critique that some childhood studies decoratively use "children's voices" by "just quoting" children for supposed authenticity (Spyrou, 2011), or treat the concept of agency as a normative and naturalized concept rather than an analytical one (Gu, 2022a; Prout, 2002). Instead, we situate our analysis of children's and young people's roles, views, subjectivities, and everyday strategies in their diverse and multilayered social, cultural, and political contexts in relation to their positionalities defined by age, gender, the stage of childhood, and so on. In other words, we understand young people's agency in their ontological positioning and experiences in their respective societies and communities. In our studies, the researchers gave children and youths space and time to address the possibilities and limits of their ability to act. As experts of their life worlds, the young people were able to describe the events in their lives, to articulate and reflect on their own position and that of the other participants. In most studies, they also very clearly addressed the limits of their ability to act and their corresponding coping strategies. They spoke about the hardships and lodged their criticism of the circumstances under which they can or cannot develop agency at all – they did not represent an excessive agency that is not theirs, contrary to the assumptions of a normative definition of agency. In some studies, children and adolescents linked their competences or their striving for developing competencies to contributing socially and economically to the family collective. This contribution is not just "helping out," nor just carrying out orders. It is an active exploration of the possibilities of support, of which the children are proud and which may enhance their standing; hence, it could be considered a form of agency. In these cases, though children's and adolescents' statements may mirror adult societies' expectations and norms projected upon them, we cannot deny that they are cooperators in the process. In other cases, however, we are exposed to young people's acts of exercising agency to their best capacities vis-à-vis the "structural forces" in their lives, which is illustrated in queer Kazhak children's resistance to shaming practices and their claim to be recognized (Levitanus, this volume), Thai youths' political defiance against a paternalistic and authoritarian state, personified in the figure of an unchallengeable royal king, and their powerful agents (Bolotta, this volume), Turkish girls' negotiation of spatial freedom at home (Türkyilmaz, this volume), and Azerbaijani children's claiming of their digital "social life" (Sultan, Bühler-Niederberger, & Nasrullayeva, this volume), to name just a few. In other words, they demonstrate a remarkable grasp of the possibilities as well as limitations of their agency in their dealing with family, educational, and societal forces.

Moreover, we open up new epistemological grounds in childhood and youth studies in Asian societies and in childhood studies in general. We contend that centering children's agency and subjectivity should not only limit to "giving voice" to children but also excavate and make audible "the silences" beyond the utterances and the speech acts of children and youths, the subaltern vis-à-vis the adult world. It is easily forgotten that the idea of "voicing" as representing and empowering a certain constituency is rooted in an ideal type of politics – representative liberal democracy (Vieira, 2020), which is not necessarily a lived reality for the majority of children and youths in the world. To zoom in on Asia, it is fair to say that the majority of young people in this region are still embedded in hierarchical familial, social, and political structures (Gu, 2022a), largely due to gerontocratic cultural traditions which often go together with political authoritarianism in their societies. In such contexts, we argue that a monolithic and monotonic conceptualization of "voice" is insufficient. It is therefore imperative that we, childhood and youth scholars, be empirically and analytically attentive to not only what is said but also to *what is not spoken about and what is tangentially spoken about* in young people's narratives, which often shed light on important social, political, and normative forces that condition the young's discursive and substantive agencies.

In a study of rural migrant children, who often spend a lengthy period of their childhood as "left-behind" children in villages before moving to their migrant parents' cities of work, Gu and Yeung (2020) describe an interview case where an 11-year-old girl Yang sank into a long silence when asked about her relationship with her parents. This long silence is meaningful if we sufficiently contextualize it: as a child who had endured emotional pains being separated from her working parents for years and who still had too little time together with her parents despite living in the same household due to the very long and exhausting working lives of her parents as migrant laborers, she probably felt a sense of alienation or estrangement from the parents. However, she was constrained from a straightforward expression of her real emotions because on the one hand the filial piety norm prohibits open criticism of one's parents, and on the other hand, a discourse about their parents' sacrifice for children's sake (truthful to a good extent) that she was socialized with from early on makes her complaint a less socially acceptable one (Gu, 2022b). In a separate instance (Gu, Chapter 1, this volume), a migrant youth Jian who lived in the host city as a de facto illegal immigrant child since he was six narrated his life history using the education–social–mobility discourse. He talked in a euphemistic way about "multiple constraints and losses of opportunities" in his educational experience and in the end expressed a sense of relief that he and his siblings ending up being highly educated brings the family their overdue respect and dignity. According to him, his parents "could retire with their heads held high." Jian's narrative of moving up social strata via education is in line with the official ideology of meritocracy in China. Underlying Jian's narrative, however, is a hidden discourse of class politics that is heavily censored: in a society where extreme depoliticization of public discourses is the order of the day, education seems to be a culturally legitimate channel (discursively and in real life) of social struggle for recognition and respect for the subaltern who are subjected

to structural injustice and discrimination. Here we see a case of *tangentially speaking* about forbidden topics in illiberal societies.

Last, we remind ourselves and our readers of a methodological reflection toward a fuller analysis and presentation of children's agency and voices. The rich and solid empirical data in the studies covered in this volume are gathered via diverse, ground-up, and reflexivity-informed methodological approaches, including in-depth interviews, ethnography, longitudinal fieldwork, case studies, child-led data collection initiatives and mixed-methods. In other words, it is through embedding children's perspectives and participation in the research designs and processes, and through fully unpacking and interpreting children's actions, narratives, and subjectivities in their contexts that we build a research agenda which differs fundamentally from adult-centric and normative frameworks in child development models. In academic institutions in many Asian contexts, these latter models dominate research and teaching programs which are heavily influenced by American empiricism (e.g., Gu, Section Introduction to East Asia, this volume). What this handbook aims to do is to usher in childhood sociology toward a broader, deeper, and richer engagement in studies of children and youths in Asian societies.

Structure of the Volume and Gaps

Of course, not all Asian countries are covered by the studies gathered in this volume. However, the two largest countries, China and India, are both represented with three and two contributions, respectively. The selection depends on the existence of social science research on childhood and adolescence in and about the countries in general and on the willingness of the authors to cooperate within the framework of content, concept, and time proposed by us editors. In this sense, the collection reflects the disciplinary orientation and the scientific networks of the editors. Also, the regions are not all covered; for example, we lack contributions on the Arab region. Readers will, however, find in our collection contributions from countries about which they are unlikely to have hitherto ever come across a contribution in international childhood and adolescence research. All authors reflect on growing up within the age-group relations of the contexts they study, and in most contributions children's and young people's perspectives receive attention.

We have organized the contributions along four Asian regions: East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia/Caucasus and Türkiye, and Southeast Asia. These four parts all begin with their own introduction, which presents and contextualizes the following chapters. These four introductions provide background information on the region important for understanding conditions of growing up and basic information in the situation of children and youth. They contain information on the state of social science research on childhood and youth in the region, which is then further elaborated on and differentiated for the respective countries in the respective subsequent chapters.

Although this volume conveys a lot of systematic background knowledge in addition to the individual studies and we were able to collect 16 studies, it is inevitably incomplete. However, we hope that it can provide a basis and encouragement for further childhood and youth studies in Asian countries. And we hope that these studies from Asian countries will also stimulate research on growing up in Western countries, just as research from Western countries has stimulated the analysis of Asian childhoods – for the benefit of global childhood and youth research.

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