



## Changes in Chinese work values: a comparison between the One-Child, Social Reform and Cultural Revolution Generations

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## Changes in Chinese work values: a comparison between the One-Child, Social Reform and Cultural Revolution Generations

### Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to investigate the changes in Chinese workers' values by comparing the work-related values of the One-Child Generation, the Social Reform Generation and the Cultural Revolution Generation.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A survey was conducted with 918 Chinese employees, the vast majority of them working for Chinese domestic firms in Guangzhou, Shaoguan, and Harbin. The collected data were analysed mainly using ANOVA, Tukey's pairwise comparison and Kruskal-Wallis tests.

**Findings** – The One-Child Generation was found to place less importance on income and job security, while possessing higher tolerance towards the practice of nepotism, than the older two generations. We found no significant differences in the levels of intrinsic values and altruism among the three generations. Additionally, our results indicate overall low altruistic values and high extrinsic values across all three generations of Chinese workers.

**Originality/value** – China's unprecedented generation of only-children as workers is an unknown factor. It is only now, over a decade after the One-Child Generation first entered the job market, that a comparative study between their work values and those of previous generations has become possible. This study exploits the momentum and is one of the first studies to include the One-Child Generation in the investigation of work value changes in Chinese society.

**Keywords** Generation, Aging, China, Work values, Intrinsic values, Altruism, Pay, Job security, *Guanxi*, Nepotism

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

As many industrialised countries face aging populations (Galanaki and Papalexandris, 2017), researchers point to the importance of investigating the effects of aging on work values (Twenge *et al.*, 2010) This has been reflected in studies of aging (or generational effects) on work values and attitudes (for literature and meta-analytic reviews, see Ng

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3 and Feldman, 2010; Twenge, 2010; Kooij *et al.*, 2011). However, the majority of these  
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5 works are based on Western samples (Cennamo and Gardner, 2008).  
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7         Despite the country's increasingly important position in the global market,  
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9 studies that empirically investigate Chinese work values are limited in number (e.g.,  
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11 Chiu *et al.*, 2002; Ralston *et al.*, 2008; Wang *et al.*, 2010; Yang, 2011), and very little  
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13 research has been conducted on the aging or generational effects on Chinese work value  
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15 changes (for exceptions, see Ralston *et al.*, 1999; Egri and Ralston, 2004; Yi *et al.*,  
16  
17 2010).  
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20         China ended its one-child policy at the beginning of 2016. However, the policy,  
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22 which lasted over three and a half decades since 1979, has created an artificially aging  
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24 society – as the society consequently has fewer younger persons and is therefore aging  
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26 fast – with a generation of so-called “little emperors” (McLoughlin, 2005). Although  
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28 research has been conducted on the characteristics of these only-children, very few, if  
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30 any, studies have investigated the work values of the One-Child Generation and  
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32 examined how they differ from previous generations. It is only now, over a decade after  
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34 they first entered the job market, that a comparative study on their work values is  
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36 possible. This study exploits this momentum and investigates generational differences  
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38 in Chinese employees' work values.  
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## 44 **Background discussions**

### 45 *Work values*

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48 Work values refer to “the outcomes people desire and feel they should attain through  
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50 work” and “shape employees' perceptions of preferences in the workplace” (Twenge *et*  
51  
52 *al.*, 2010, p. 1121). Various work values, such as intrinsic, extrinsic, social, affiliative,  
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54 growth, security and leisure, are discussed in the literature (Twenge *et al.*, 2010; Kooij  
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3 *et al.*, 2011). This study predominantly focuses on intrinsic and extrinsic values as the  
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5 difference between these has been identified as one of the most basic and persistent  
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7 work value distinctions (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Twenge *et al.*, 2010).  
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9  
10 Extrinsic work values are connected to tangible rewards external to the  
11  
12 individual. One takes action in expectation that it leads to a distinct outcome, such as  
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14 income, promotion, or security (Ryan and Deci, 2000). In contrast, intrinsic work values  
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16 satisfy needs directly and stem from the intangible rewards internal to the individual.  
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18 One takes action because an activity is inherently interesting and enjoyable, and is  
19  
20 connected to, for example, growth, autonomy and creativity (Schwartz, 1999; Ryan and  
21  
22 Deci, 2000).  
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24  
25 Besides the intrinsic/extrinsic dichotomy, Kooij *et al.* (2011) present another  
26  
27 set of value measurement categories, which include social and security values. Schwartz  
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29 (1999) links social values with the wider core values of contribution to society. These  
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31 relate to altruistic work values, which include the desire to “help others and society  
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33 through work” (Twenge *et al.*, 2010, p. 1124). Social values (or altruism) can also be  
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35 understood as one component of intrinsic values (Twenge *et al.*, 2010) while security  
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37 values are more associated with extrinsic values.  
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40 From extrinsic values, the current study focuses on income and job security,  
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42 examined separately. This study will not include promotion in the hypothesised  
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44 investigation. This is because one of the three generations examined in the study is  
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46 much closer to the retirement age and for them promotion therefore would not have the  
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48 same significance as for the other two generations. This study also examines intrinsic  
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50 values (interesting work) and altruism separately. Although altruism could be  
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52 understood as one component of intrinsic values, it may have different significance for  
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54 Chinese workers as will be discussed later. Additionally, the values related to *guanxi*  
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3 and favouritism will be examined, as such values play a key role in governing human  
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5 behaviour in Chinese business and society at large (Kim *et al.*, 2013).  
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### 8 *Life-span approach*

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10 The life-span approach “advances the possibility for behavioural change at any point in  
11  
12 the life cycle” (Sterns and Miklos, 1995, p. 259). Life-span theories posit that  
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14 person–environment transactions “help shape the person–situation context in which  
15  
16 motivation takes place” (Kanfer and Ackerman, 2004, p. 441). Schooling experience,  
17  
18 for example, may contribute to the formation of work values whereas value differences  
19  
20 may condition job choices and career paths. Kanfer and Ackerman (2004) identify  
21  
22 intraindividual change trajectories based on the nature of change across the life-span.  
23  
24 They propose that older workers’ work values are impacted by age-related changes on  
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26 the effort–utility function, which is determined by the predicted amount of effort  
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28 required for the requisite performance. This may point towards a reduced effect of  
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30 extrinsic values on older adults. To motivate older adults, reducing the amount of effort  
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32 demanded from them may be more effective than offering large incentives for increased  
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34 effort (Kanfer and Ackerman, 2004).  
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39 Within the life-span theory, socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen *et*  
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41 *al.*, 1999) posits that when people age and increasingly perceive time as limited, their  
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43 value-related goals shift from those linked to knowledge acquisition and consequent  
44  
45 horizon expansion to those related to the regulation of emotional states. Older people  
46  
47 are therefore more likely to attach greater importance to experiencing meaningful social  
48  
49 ties and finding meaning from life (Carstensen, 2006). This phenomenon has also been  
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51 studied using generativity theory (Erikson, 1995). The latter proposes that persons in  
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53 middle age begin to develop the feeling of care for others which relates closely to  
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55 altruistic and prosocial values.  
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### *Generational differences*

A cohort shares certain experiences at different life stages, and the events occurring at younger developmental stages strongly influence work values. This adds to the work value differences between older and younger workers, which derive from life-span effects. Such differences signify generational (or cohort) characteristics. A “cohort” is defined as “the total population of organisms born at the same point or interval in time” (Schaie, 1965, p. 93). “Generation” is used to refer to cohorts who share not only birth years but also “significant life events at critical developmental stages” (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 66). Although these two terms are at times used interchangeably, the current study uses “generation” as a term that connotes the influences of life events. The latter include changes in policies, economies, and social movements, which all may have an impact on generational characteristics (Kupperschmidt, 2000).

### *Generations in China*

Over the last half century alone, people in China have experienced a series of critical life events including economic and policy changes. Based on the generally agreed values formation framework that most of one’s values are fixed by the late teens (e.g., Inglehart, 1997), Ralston *et al.* (1999) identify a logical segmentation of three generations, with consideration of China’s political history. The first one comprises those individuals who grew up in the era of Social Reform (1977–present). The second one is formed by those individuals who experienced the Great Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) in their adolescence. The third one consists of those individuals who experienced the Communist Consolidation (1949–1965).

Building on this segmentation, we reviewed the economic situation as well as political orientation of China in the last half century and have identified three generations. The first generation is formed by individuals who experienced the Great

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3 Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) in their adolescence. In their youth, many of them  
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5 were sent to the countryside to take up farming instead of going to school, and the lack  
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7 of education has caused hardship in their working lives (Chen, 1999). In this study, we  
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9 call this cohort the “Cultural Revolution Generation” (CRG). The subjects in this group  
10  
11 are born between 1950 and 1964.  
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14 The second generation is formed by individuals who spent their youth during  
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16 the era of Social Reform, being born between 1965 and 1981. We refer to this group as  
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18 the “Social Reform Generation” (SRG). This is the generation who experienced  
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20 significant economic, social and labour policy changes in their youth as the country  
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22 joined the global economy in the 1980s. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the  
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24 socialistic egalitarian approach was taken over by the new, pragmatic approach to  
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26 economic modernisation. “Special economic zones” were designated, and those who  
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28 could were encouraged to gain wealth first, consequently tolerating income disparity  
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30 and polarisation for the sake of rapid economic growth (Kwong, 1994). As this  
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32 generation started to enter their working lives, an individual’s freedom to select a job  
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34 became granted (Zhu and Dowling, 2002), and all firms were required to base their  
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36 employment on labour contracts (Ding *et al.*, 2000).  
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40 The third generation are those born under the Fundamental National Policy of  
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42 1979, which restricted every family in urban areas to only one child (Yi *et al.*, 2010). As  
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44 it was not until 1982 that the policy was instituted with systematic incentives and  
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46 penalties (Mcloughlin, 2005), we take the beginning of this generation as 1982 and call  
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48 this cohort the “One-Child Generation” (OCG). This generation has grown up being the  
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50 centre of attention of four grandparents and two parents – the perilous 4-2-1 indulgence  
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52 (Shao and Herbig, 1994) – and are often considered to be self-centred and materialistic  
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54 (Mcloughlin, 2005). At the same time, they bear all the expectations of their families  
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3 and are under acute pressure to be successful in school and in life (Belk, 2002). The  
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5 One-Child Generation is new and unique to China. Thus, observing the development  
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7 and values of this “Spoiled, One-Child” generation as they enter the business world is of  
8  
9 particular interest (Ralston *et al.*, 1999, p. 425).

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12 These generation cut-off points differentiate the current study from others,  
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14 enabling it to focus on the One-Child Generation as a new cohort. The study by Chen  
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16 and Lian (2015), for example, examines the work value differences in generations of  
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18 Chinese employees of the Transitional Generation (born between 1967 and 1978) and  
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20 the Millennial generation (born between 1979 and 1990). However, in order to focus on  
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22 the One-Child Generation, the cut-off point of 1982, which the current study uses, is  
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24 more suitable. This is because, as previously mentioned, although the one-child policy  
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26 was introduced in 1979, it was not until 1982 that the policy was applied evenly across  
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28 the country (McLoughlin, 2005). Therefore some Millennials may not be only children,  
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30 making the cut-off point of 1982 more appropriate for a more accurate study of the One-  
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32 Child Generation’s work values.  
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### 37 **Hypotheses development**

#### 38 *Intrinsic values – interesting/enjoyable work*

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40 The aforementioned socioemotional selectivity theory posits that older people are more  
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42 likely to attach greater importance to inner significance and meaning (Carstensen,  
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44 2006). The meta-analysis by Kooij *et al.* (2011) demonstrates that intrinsic work-related  
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46 values become stronger with age, supported by the study results of Inceoglu *et al.*,  
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48 (2012) and Ng and Feldman (2010). However, these studies are predominantly based on  
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50 Western context, and the unique circumstances surrounding Chinese workers may have  
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3 differentiated their pattern of age-related work value change from those observed in the  
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5 West.

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7 Intrinsicly motivated employees find their work genuinely interesting and  
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9 enjoyable (Ryan and Deci, 2000). However, the concept of interesting work may have  
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11 been rather alien to the majority of, and especially older, Chinese workers (Fisher and  
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13 Yuan, 1998). Until the early 1990s, Chinese workers were not given choices of  
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15 occupations. Jobs were assigned to the new graduates by the government (Yi *et al.*,  
16  
17 2010). Unlike the Western samples of previously mentioned studies who further  
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19 increased their intrinsic work-related values with their age, Chinese workers of older  
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21 generations may have had little basis on which to nurture an inherent interest in their  
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23 work.  
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27 Consequently, intrinsic values in the older generations of Chinese workers may  
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29 not have developed to be any higher than younger generations. *The situation is different*  
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31 *for today's younger generation of Chinese. In comparison to the workers of previous*  
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33 *generations, younger contemporary Chinese workers have more freedom to choose their*  
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35 *occupations, similarly to their Western counterparts. They therefore may have the*  
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37 *foundation to increase their intrinsic values with age in the future. However,*  
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39 *socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 2006), supported by aforementioned*  
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41 *studies (e.g., Kooij *et al.*, 2011; Inceoglu *et al.*, 2012), suggests that intrinsic work-*  
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43 *related values are yet to develop in younger workers. We therefore hypothesise that*  
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45 *there is not yet significant difference in the levels of intrinsic values amongst the*  
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47 *generations:*  
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52 H1. There is no significant difference in the levels of intrinsic values amongst the  
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54 three Chinese generations.  
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### *Altruistic values*

Theories of socioemotional selectivity and generativity suggest that altruistic values strengthen with age. Unlike the concept of interesting work, Chinese workers of previous generations historically have received active encouragements to develop the notion of benefiting others through work. Unlike the case of intrinsic values of interesting work, they therefore may have had foundation to strengthen altruistic work values with age.

Under the socialist ideology, the Chinese government emphasised moral encouragement as almost synonymous with internalised work values (Tung, 1981). Every worker was encouraged to self-sacrifice for the general welfare and the state, and expected to do his best “according to his ability”, regardless of the monetary rewards (Tung, 1981, p. 486). This focus on benefiting the group – a feature of collectivistic cultures (Triandis, 1995) – contrasts with the individualism dominant in capitalist market economies (Ralston *et al.*, 2008). An empirical study (Hartung *et al.*, 2010) found positive relationships between collectivism and altruism, while suggesting zero to negative correlations between altruism and individualism. In a comparative study of eight countries by Elizur *et al.* (1991), Chinese respondents ranked “contribution to society” considerably higher than participants from other countries did.

Nevertheless, in contemporary China, those who grew up in the era of social reform are considered to be more individualistic and materialistic. They are more inclined to give priority to their personal interests over those of the collective (Kwong, 1994). According to Lin and Ho (2009) older Chinese are more likely to care about others. Linking the industrialisation process with global value homogenisation, Ralston *et al.* (1999) find that the younger Chinese generation displays more individualistic

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3 tendencies. This is reflected in being less committed to traditional Chinese values such  
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5 as collectivism and Confucianism. From these observations, we derive the following  
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7 hypotheses:

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11 H2a. The One-Child Generation values the notion of benefiting others through work  
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13 (altruism) less than the Social Reform Generation does.

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15 H2b. The Social Reform Generation values the notion of benefiting others through  
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17 work (altruism) less than the Cultural Revolution Generation does.  
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22 *Extrinsic values – good income*

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24 The intraindividual change trajectories of Kanfer and Ackerman (2004) predict that  
25  
26 extrinsic values will have diminished effect on older adults. This is rooted in the  
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28 increased reluctance of older people to exert the additional effort required to achieve the  
29  
30 offered incentive. Several studies' findings support this prediction. The meta-analysis  
31  
32 by Kooij *et al.* (2011) found a significant negative relationship between age and  
33  
34 strength of extrinsic values, and the empirical study by Inceoglu *et al.* (2012) found  
35  
36 older employees to value less extrinsically rewarding job features. The question then is  
37  
38 how these may apply to Chinese workers.  
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42 In comparison to workers in the West, Chinese workers are considered to place  
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44 less value in extrinsic rewards, such as pay and other material rewards (Humphreys,  
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46 2007). The study of Elizur *et al.* (1991) demonstrated the relative unimportance of work  
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48 values of pay and other material rewards for Chinese workers in a comparative study  
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50 with samples from eight countries. As the Taiwan sample scored high on these  
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52 instrumental values, Jackson and Bak (1998) suggest this phenomenon is the result of  
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54 several decades of socialist influence, rather than cultural characteristics. Traditionally,  
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3 in China, wide wage disparity between workers was discouraged by the government  
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5 (Tung, 1981). In state-owned enterprises, where the majority of the Chinese urban  
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7 workforce were employed for decades preceding the Social Reform (Chiu *et al.*, 2002),  
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9 the wage differentials between workers were kept low (Ding *et al.*, 2000). Being  
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11 seniority-based, promotions were beyond one's control and accompanied by only a  
12  
13 small salary rise (Warner, 2008).  
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16 Under the Social Reform, the equality-based, fixed-wage system was gradually  
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18 replaced by equity-based, differentiation rewards systems, such as performance-based  
19  
20 pay (Du and Choi, 2010). Although the wage disparity between workers is still kept  
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22 relatively low in China compared to countries such as the US, this has led to the vast  
23  
24 income and wealth inequalities of contemporary Chinese society (Warner, 2010).  
25  
26 Alongside this, Chinese employees' preferences shifted away from the age-based  
27  
28 egalitarian approach of socialism towards a reform model with pay differentiation  
29  
30 (Bozionelos and Wang, 2007). Such a shift, however, did not occur evenly across  
31  
32 different generations. In the latter half of the 1990s, Chen and his colleagues reported a  
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34 study finding that older Chinese employees were more supportive of the egalitarian  
35  
36 reward system than their younger counterparts (Chen *et al.*, 1997). On the other hand,  
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38 Chinese youths in the late 1980s began choosing jobs based on income (Kwong, 1994),  
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40 and young Chinese managers in 1990s were found to be more likely to act  
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42 independently in the pursuit of profits (Ralston *et al.*, 1999). We therefore hypothesise:  
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48 H3a. The One-Child Generation value good income more than the Social Reform  
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50 Generation does.

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52 H3b. The Social Reform Generation value good income more than the Cultural  
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54 Revolution Generation does.  
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### *Job security*

Job security is closely associated with extrinsic work values. However, the Chinese context may render distinct patterns of age-related changes to job security values, independent from other extrinsic values such as income. Under the practice known as the “iron rice-bowl” (Warner, 2001; Chiu *et al.*, 2002; Qiao *et al.*, 2009), employees of state-owned enterprises had no need to worry about their performance and could rely on the security of their jobs through lifetime employment. However, state-owned enterprises proportionally fell into a minority after the Social Reform both in number and in terms of their contributions to national productivity output (Warner, 2008). With this decrease in number and downsizing, a significant number of jobs were lost (Warner, 2010). The security of lifetime employment disappeared rapidly (Warner, 2008), signalling “the breaking of the iron rice-bowl” (Zhu and Dowling, 2002, p. 573).

Endorsed by the legislation change of 1987, China in the 1990s saw the emergence of a labour market alongside the enhancement of labour mobility (Zhu and Dowling, 2002). For the younger generation in China after the Social Reform, job security was no longer the norm. Younger Chinese managers in the 1990s were ready to move in pursuit of the best opportunities (Ralston *et al.*, 1999). A survey in 2005 found a further increase in turnover, especially among young employees (Warner, 2008). Reflecting this trend, Yang (2011) found job security to be a stronger work value for older Chinese employees than for younger ones. The study by Qiao *et al.* (2009) also found that older Chinese employees exhibited greater organisational commitment than younger employees. Based on these findings, we hypothesise:

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3 H4a. Job security is less important for the One-Child Generation than for the Social  
4 Reform Generation.

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7 H4b. Job security is less important for the Social Reform Generation than for the  
8 Cultural Revolution Generation.  
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### 10 11 12 13 *Guanxi and favouritism*

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15 *Guanxi* plays a key role in governing human behaviour in Chinese business and society  
16 at large (Wong *et al.*, 2010; Kim *et al.*, 2013). *Guanxi* is defined as the existence of  
17 particularistic ties, which exclusively exist between particular individuals, including the  
18 ties between relatives, friends, co-workers, and supervisors–subordinates (Jacobs,  
19 1979). Traditionally, through *guanxi*, a person is expected to make things “a little more  
20 convenient” for those of his/her particularistic ties (Jacobs, 1979, p. 238). This leads to  
21 favouritism or nepotism – unequal treatment of individuals within Chinese  
22 organisations based on their personal relationships (Kim *et al.*, 2013). It is also a feature  
23 of *guanxi* that the weaker partner of the tie can expect special favours from the other  
24 partner, who has a stronger, higher rank (Alston, 1989) and is capable of providing the  
25 “convenience”.  
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39 Collectivism and Confucianism, which form the foundation of Chinese culture,  
40 also emphasise harmonious human relations and had an impact on the development of  
41 *guanxi* (Wong *et al.*, 2010). While previous studies found the characteristics of  
42 collectivism and Confucianism weakening among younger Chinese (e.g., Kwong, 1994;  
43 Ralston *et al.*, 1999; Lin and Ho, 2009), some studies suggest that the significant role  
44 *guanxi* plays in society and business survived the Social Reform and subsequent radical  
45 economic and societal change in China (Wong *et al.*, 2010; Kim *et al.*, 2013). Further,  
46 according to Nolan’s (2011) literature review, some scholars favour the view that the  
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3 significance of *guanxi* has increased in the period of economic reform. Since the Social  
4 Reform, Chinese youth have been deeply affected by and have indulged in the practice  
5 of nepotism (Kwong, 1994).  
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9 Based on the above-mentioned view that *guanxi* works more favourably for  
10 those in weaker positions and lower ranks of the tie and also on the above review of  
11 *guanxi* studies, we derive our last hypothesis:  
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18 H5a. Nepotism in the work place is more accepted by the One-Child Generation than  
19 by the Social Reform Generation.  
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22 H5b. Nepotism in the work place is more accepted by the Social Reform Generation  
23 than by the Cultural Revolution Generation.  
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## 28 **Data and method**

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30 Data collection took place over the summer in 2012. The questionnaire was prepared in  
31 English and translated into Chinese by a bilingual scholar. The translation was then  
32 verified by two academics of UK universities who were native Chinese. The majority of  
33 the survey was conducted on the pencil–paper basis, because many older Chinese  
34 workers would not use computers and the internet daily. In such cases, one researcher  
35 went into the company sites with permission and distributed/collected the  
36 questionnaires. Additionally, some of the survey was conducted online, via instant  
37 messaging software. Altogether 918 usable questionnaires were collected from Chinese  
38 employees.  
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50 The vast majority (96.1%) of respondents are employees of three large state-  
51 owned enterprises in Guangzhou, Shaoguan, and Harbin as well as other Chinese  
52 domestic companies. These three cities belong to different tiers according to the  
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3 Chinese city tier system, which reflects differences in income level, population size and  
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5 infrastructure, among other factors. One of the three enterprises is a medium-sized (with  
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7 over 100 employees) comprehensive trade company located in Guangzhou (tier 1 city).  
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9 Another is a large (with over 500 employees) transportation company located in  
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11 Shaoguan (tier 4), and the other is a large (over 4,500 employees) manufacturing  
12  
13 company in Harbin (tier 3). Other domestic companies belong to various industries,  
14  
15 including communication, finance, public administration, IT, and services. Only a small  
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17 proportion (3.9%) of the respondents work for foreign joint ventures or foreign-owned  
18  
19 enterprises.  
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22 The sample is almost equally distributed between the One-Child Generation  
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24 (40.6%) and the Social Reform Generation (36.8%), while the Cultural Revolution  
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26 Generation is a smaller group (22.5%). Table 1 summarises the sociodemographic and  
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28 economic characteristics of the sample along with the results of: the ANOVA test,  
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30 conducted to evaluate differences among means computed in the three generational  
31  
32 groups; the Tukey's pairwise comparison test, to evaluate the differences between any  
33  
34 pair of means on which the ANOVA test has been computed; and the Chi-square test, to  
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36 check for independence between two qualitative variables.  
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**Table 1 about here**

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About 56% of the overall respondents are male, and there are no significant differences in the gender distribution among generational clusters. Significant differences are detectable in regard to the marital status (please refer to both the ANOVA and the Chi-square results). In particular, the respondents of the One-Child Generation are mainly



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3 single while very small proportions of the other two generations are single. This  
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5 relationship is confirmed by the post-hoc tests (i.e. Tukey's pairwise comparisons),  
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7 which highlight the significant differences between OCG-SRG, and OCG-CRG. The  
8  
9 Chi-square test has confirmed that both education and monthly income levels are  
10  
11 significantly different among the generational clusters. In particular, the One-Child  
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13 Generation overall has higher levels of education than the other two older generations.  
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### 15 16 17 18 *Measures*

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20 The questionnaire was designed to collect information on the following five  
21  
22 measurements: intrinsic values; altruism; income-related extrinsic values; job security  
23  
24 values; and nepotism tolerance. Intrinsic values were measured with **two** items adapted  
25  
26 from Kuvaas and Dysvik (2009): "The tasks that I do at work are enjoyable" and  
27  
28 "Sometimes I become so inspired in my job that I almost forget everything else around  
29  
30 me". Altruism was measured with a **question** adapted from Grant and Berry (2011): "I  
31  
32 care about benefiting others through my work". Income-related extrinsic values were  
33  
34 measured through an item asking: "My main reason to show up every day at work is my  
35  
36 salary". To assess job security values, we used an item modified from the Meaning of  
37  
38 Work Survey C (England *et al.*, 1995): "I work hard in order to keep my job". All the  
39  
40 above four measures used 5-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly  
41  
42 agree).  
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45  
46 Tolerance towards the practice of nepotism was measured with an **item** adopted  
47  
48 from Rawwas *et al.* (2006), asking "Do you feel that getting promotion through the  
49  
50 influence of a family or personal connection is acceptable?" This item was measured  
51  
52 with 5-point Likert scales (1 = totally unacceptable, 5 = totally acceptable). **As all these**  
53  
54 **measures used either single or two items, no reliability tests were conducted.**  
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3 Participants were also asked to rank 10 items that describe the work values in  
4 order of importance. The items included good personal relations with co-workers, good  
5 personal relations with supervisors, good job security, good pay, a lot of autonomy, and  
6 contributing to society through one's work. The question was a modification of the  
7 Meaning of Work Survey C by England *et al.* (1995). We used this for the provision of  
8 supplementary information for the measurements of work-related values.  
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## 15 16 17 18 **Results**

19 Figure 1 presents the distribution of the above described five measurements for the  
20 whole sample and per each generation.  
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28 **Figure 1 about here**  
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33 To further analyse differences among generations, the following three tests have been  
34 conducted: 1) the ANOVA test to evaluate differences among proportions (i.e. means)  
35 of respondents, belonging to the three generational groups, who strongly agree (and  
36 either strongly agree or agree) with each statement; 2) the Tukey's pairwise comparison  
37 test to evaluate which pairs of proportions (i.e. means), previously tested through the  
38 ANOVA test, are different; and 3) the Kruskal-Wallis test to evaluate differences  
39 among the medians calculated on the original 5-point Likert-type scale variables for  
40 each generational group. The results are summarised in Table 2. As we can observe,  
41 significant differences, in both means (ANOVA test) and medians (Kruskall-Wallis),  
42 are detected for income, job security, and nepotism tolerance items supporting our  
43 hypotheses.  
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**Table 2 about here**

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Hypothesis 1 assumed no significant differences in the intrinsic value levels among the three generations, which is supported by our results [where no significant differences, either in means or in medians, are detected](#) (Table 2, 1a and 1b).

Hypothesis 2 attributed lower levels of altruism a) to the One-Child Generation in comparison to the Social Reform Generation, and b) to the Social Reform Generation in comparison to the Cultural Revolution Generation. However, we did not find any significant difference [in either means or median levels](#) of altruism among generational clusters. Hypotheses 2a and 2b are therefore rejected.

Hypothesis 3 focused on income and stipulated that good income was valued more a) by the One-Child Generation than by the Social Reform Generation, and b) by the Social Reform Generation than by the Cultural Revolution Generation. [The ANOVA test and the Kruskal-Wallis test reveal significant differences in general. Further, the Tukey's pairwise comparison test](#) suggests that each of the two older generations respectively value good income significantly more than the One-Child Generation does, while there is no significant difference between the two older generations. Therefore, Hypotheses 3a and 3b are rejected.

Hypothesis 4 assumed lower job security importance a) for the One-Child Generation than for the Social Reform Generation, and b) for the Social Reform Generation than for the Cultural Revolution Generation. [The ANOVA test and the Kruskal-Wallis test reveal significant differences in general. More precisely, the Tukey's pairwise comparison test](#) shows that the One-Child Generation value job

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2 security significantly less than the other two generations, while there is no difference  
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4 between the older two generations. Thus, we accept Hypothesis 4a but reject 4b.  
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7 Hypothesis 5 stipulated a higher level of nepotism acceptance a) by the One-  
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9 Child Generation than by the Social Reform Generation, and b) by the Social Reform  
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11 Generation than by the Cultural Revolution Generation. Hypothesis 5a was supported,  
12  
13 as through Tukey's pairwise comparison test, the One-Child Generation demonstrated  
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15 significantly higher tolerance of nepotism in comparison to the other two generations.  
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17 Hypothesis 5b was rejected as we found no significant difference in the levels of  
18  
19 nepotism acceptance of the two older generations.  
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22 Providing information supplementary to the above hypotheses testing results,  
23  
24 Table 3 presents the results summary of the work values rank order, where ranks are  
25  
26 reported for the whole sample and per each generation. The ranks have been created  
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28 according to the frequency by which each item has been selected as first, second, or  
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30 third most important value by the respondents.  
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37 **Table 3 about here**  
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42 In the rank order, all three generations ranked good pay as the most important work  
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44 value, job security as the second, and good personal relations with co-workers as the  
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46 third. The older two generations ranked good personal relations with supervisors as the  
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48 fourth most important work value whereas the One-Child Generation ranked this value  
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50 as the eighth. The fourth most important value for the One-Child Generation was  
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52 convenient work hours. Ranked as the two least important values by all three  
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54 generations were job autonomy and contributing to society through work.  
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## Discussion

As hypothesised, this study found no one contemporary Chinese generation had higher intrinsic values than another. This result contradicts what socioemotional selectivity theory posits and may indicate the unique conditions and experiences that distinguish the three Chinese generations from the Western experiences. To begin with, as previously mentioned, the concept of interesting work was historically alien to Chinese workers. In line with this observation, Chinese samples rated the importance of job interest considerably lower in comparison to other countries' sample groups in studies by Elizur *et al.* (1991) and Fisher and Yuan (1998).

Intrinsically motivated individuals take action also because an activity is connected to autonomy (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Yet, our work value rank order results indicate that the contemporary Chinese workers value work autonomy low across generations (9<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> out of 10 values, see Table 3). Such low importance placed on intrinsic values by Chinese workers may also reflect the country's economic development stage. Inglehart (1997) observes that in the emergence of industrial society, maximisation of economic gains is the individual's top priority, and that as the society shifts into a postmodern stage, an individual's focus shifts towards the quality of work experience and meaningful work. As Fisher and Yuan (1998, p. 520) posit, seeking the satisfaction of "higher-level" needs such as interesting work is "more of a prerogative" of "workers in highly developed countries". This, at the same time, implies Chinese workers may find increasing importance in meaningful work and intrinsic values as the society passes through modernisation and shifts into a postmodern stage.

Our findings suggest that the One-Child Generation values income less than the other two generations. This result may be attributable to the family life cycle stage

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2  
3 (Kalleberg and Loscocco, 1983). While the majority (72%) of our One-Child  
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5 Generation respondents are single, the majority of the Social Reform Generation (89%)  
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7 and the Cultural Revolution Generation (91%) respondents are married. Economic  
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9 conditions such as house prices soaring at a faster pace than workers' income levels  
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11 (Zhang *et al.*, 2012) may have further affected the importance of financial rewards for  
12  
13 married workers. In contrast, the majority of the One-Child Generation is likely to be  
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15 still living under the protection of their parents (Yi *et al.*, 2010).  
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18 This, however, does not necessarily mean that the One-Child Generation  
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20 consider income less important than other work values. In fact, our work value rank  
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22 order results indicate that all three generations consider income as most important. This  
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24 contradicts previous studies, which suggested the relative insignificance of pay and  
25  
26 other material rewards as a motivator for Chinese workers both conceptually (e.g.,  
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28 Jackson and Bak, 1998; Humphreys, 2007) and empirically (pay 20<sup>th</sup>, and material  
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30 rewards 19<sup>th</sup>, out of 24 work values; for details see Elizur *et al.*, 1991). Until the early  
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32 1980s, the amount of consumer goods available in China was still limited (Tung, 1981),  
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34 which in turn limited people's desire for more money. However, after a few decades of  
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36 economic development, our sample of Chinese workers across all generations chose  
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38 good pay as the most important work value.  
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42 A decade preceding the current study, some studies (Fisher and Yuan, 1998;  
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44 Chiu *et al.*, 2002) found that good wages and other material rewards had already  
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46 become the most important factors for Chinese workers. However, these studies drew  
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48 samples from Hong Kong-owned and foreign-owned companies or Western joint  
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50 ventures, and therefore may not have reflected the overall trend in the society. Instead,  
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52 respondents of the survey used in the current study are mainly employees of Chinese  
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54 domestic and state-owned enterprises. Within such settings the egalitarian approach to  
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3 the reward system dominated, and wage used to have little power as a motivator. Our  
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5 finding indicates that money has become an important incentive also for Chinese  
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7 workers of state-owned and other domestic enterprises for both younger and older  
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9 workers.

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11 The current study found that the One-Child Generation values job security less  
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13 than older generations do. This is in line with the findings of previous studies analysing  
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15 predominantly Western samples, as investigated in the meta-analysis by Kooij *et al.*  
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17 (2011), as well as those with Chinese workers (Qiao *et al.*, 2009; Yang, 2011). Both sets  
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19 of studies found that older age groups had stronger job security motives compared with  
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21 younger age groups. However, the contexts of such findings are different. In the former  
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23 case, Kooij *et al.* (2011) attribute the lower security motives among the younger  
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25 generation to improved job conditions in the last five decades. In the case of China, the  
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27 last five decades represented hardship for many belonging to the Cultural Revolution  
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29 Generation (Chen, 1999). Many of them had their education interrupted by the Cultural  
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31 Revolution, and when state-owned enterprises restructured in the 1990s (Zhu and  
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33 Dowling, 2002), they were among the first to lose their jobs (Chen, 1999). Qiao *et al.*  
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35 (2009) found that less-educated employees had higher organisational commitment. With  
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37 lower education, workers have fewer opportunities for finding other jobs and hence tend  
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39 to value job security more. As Warner (2001) argues, the emergence of the Chinese  
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41 labour market in the 1990s mainly benefited younger workers, leaving out the older  
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43 ones.  
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48 Similar explanations apply to the Social Reform Generation. As illustrated in  
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50 Table 1, the Social Reform Generation received less education than the One-Child  
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52 Generation did. This is an overall trend in China. The family expenditure is  
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54 concentrated on the education of the only child of the family (Belk, 2002), and  
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3 consequently, a larger proportion of the One-Child Generation are more highly educated  
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5 than any of the previous generations (Elegant, 2007). With better qualifications, the  
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7 One-Child Generation has more options and freedom to change jobs for higher incomes,  
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9 whereas the lower education level for older generations makes it difficult to find a new  
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11 job after losing one. Thus, the emphasis on job security of Chinese older generations  
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13 may come from their disadvantage in the competitive labour market.  
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16 Many members of the Cultural Revolution Generation received the pre-  
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18 Cultural Revolution education emphasising idealistic values, including patriotism,  
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20 altruism, commitment internalisation and heroism through role models who sacrificed  
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22 themselves for others (Chen, 1999). While Confucianism was strongly denied by the  
23  
24 Party during the Cultural Revolution in pursuit of Maoism and ideological purity (Egri  
25  
26 and Ralston, 2004), the socialist doctrine continued to prevail (Ralston *et al.*, 1999),  
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28 under which self-sacrifice for the general welfare was strongly encouraged (Tung,  
29  
30 1981). Notwithstanding this, contrary to our predication, we found no difference in the  
31  
32 levels of altruism among the three generations and further found that Chinese workers  
33  
34 ranked the importance of contributing to society through work as very low (10<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>  
35  
36 and 9<sup>th</sup> out of 10 values) across all generations (as shown in Table 3).  
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40 This is a stark change from a previous study (Elizur *et al.*, 1991) that found a  
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42 Chinese sample ranked contribution to society considerably higher (4<sup>th</sup> out of 24 items)  
43  
44 than the other seven sample groups (who ranked the item 20<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup>). Elizur *et al.*  
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46 (1991) suggest the result to be a reflection of the collectivistic culture. Our findings may  
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48 then suggest an overall decline of collectivist and Confucian values in the Chinese  
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50 society. Further, the study by Du and Choi (2010) found that Chinese employees in  
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52 domestic firms possessed more altruistic behaviour than those in foreign firms.  
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3 However, our findings indicate the penetration of decline in altruistic values among  
4 employees of Chinese domestic and state-owned enterprises.  
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7 Not all traditions, however, seem to be diminishing. Despite the reported  
8 decline in Confucian values, *guanxi*, albeit having its philosophical basis in  
9 Confucianism (Bedford, 2011), seems to hold a special value among Chinese younger  
10 workers. Our findings suggest the One-Child Generation is enjoying the benefits of  
11 *guanxi* and networking. Boisot and Child (1996) posit that the economic transformation  
12 of China has given rise to network capitalism, suggesting the persistent importance of  
13 relationships based on the long-term network in Chinese business. More recently, Tung  
14 *et al.* (2008) support this view. Our findings further suggest that the Chinese younger  
15 generation is more inclined to tolerate nepotism or favouritism. The latter two are  
16 considered to reflect the negative side of *guanxi* (Fan, 2002). While *guanxi* is likely to  
17 lose its importance when dealing with the government as China moves towards an open  
18 market system (Fan, 2002), our findings indicate that the practices of favour exchanges  
19 based on human networks – *guanxi* – are still widely accepted among young Chinese  
20 workers.  
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37 We considered life-span theories developed with Western samples in our  
38 hypothesis-building, and our findings indicate certain limitations in the applicability of  
39 these theories to the current socioeconomic and political conditions of Chinese society.  
40 Intraindividual change trajectories identified by Kanfer and Ackerman (2004) propose a  
41 diminished effect of extrinsic motivators on older adults as a result of age-related  
42 changes in personal preferences. Our results did not support this assertion for Chinese  
43 workers. To the contrary, the current study found that, while all generations have come  
44 to ascribe higher importance to financial rewards over the last three decades, the older  
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3 Chinese generations have grown to place stronger importance on income than the  
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5 youngest generation has.  
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7 Our results also did not support the socioemotional selectivity theory of  
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9 Carstensen *et al.* (1999). The theory indicates that older people increasingly seek for  
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11 inner meaning. However, our results found no difference in the levels of intrinsic values  
12  
13 among the three generations of Chinese workers. Further, the generativity theory of  
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15 Erikson (1995), together with socioemotional selectivity theory, propose an increase of  
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17 altruistic values with age. However, in our sample, the older Chinese generations'  
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19 altruistic values were not stronger than those of younger generations, and they too  
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21 ranked the altruistic values very low among various work values. As altruism used to be  
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23 valued higher among Chinese workers, this suggests that older Chinese workers'  
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25 altruistic values have possibly declined with age. Thus, economic and social changes  
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27 seem to have intervened in the process of intraindividual change in Chinese workers.  
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### 33 **Future research, limitations and managerial implications**

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35 From the above discussions, we posit that the economic developmental stage and other  
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37 societal conditions affect the applicability of the life-span theories, especially to non-  
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39 Western societies like China. Future research could try to investigate this further.  
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41 The current study is cross-sectional, as are most studies on generational  
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43 differences in work values (Twenge, 2010). The results therefore cannot be understood  
44  
45 in terms of causality. If one wishes to investigate the effect of cultural change upon the  
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47 behaviours of individuals of similar age, a time-lag study would be more suitable. Such  
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49 studies would conduct cohort examinations at different points in time to separate  
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51 generational differences from age differences (Twenge *et al.*, 2010). Instead, this study  
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53 investigated age/cohort characteristics at the time of the survey, and as such, any  
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3 difference we find could be due to the inextricably confounded effects of age – career  
4 stage or life-span – and cohort/generation differences (Schaie, 1965; Kalleberg and  
5 Loscocco, 1983; Twenge, 2010). The hypotheses were formed accordingly, asking  
6  
7 “whether there are differences in a given characteristic for samples drawn from different  
8 cohorts” measured at the same time (Schaie, 1965, p. 95).  
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14 Other limitations of this study rest on the nature of the sample. Firstly, the vast  
15 majority of our sample work at Chinese state-owned enterprises, and as such may have  
16 different values from those working for privately owned domestic and multinational  
17 companies (e.g., Wang, 2004). Employees in state-owned enterprises tend to hold  
18 higher levels of Chinese cultural values. In particular, *guanxi* is believed to play a more  
19 important role in state-owned enterprises (Wong, 2018), not least because these are  
20 particularly difficult to enter without help from others. The difference may also affect  
21 other work values including those related to altruism, job security, and rewards.  
22 Examination of such differences was beyond the scope of the current study. Future  
23 studies may address this limitation and compare our results with the work values of  
24 Chinese employees working in private and foreign-invested companies.  
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38 Secondly, our sample is not representative of the whole Chinese population,  
39 since no random sampling technique has been adopted to select either the enterprises or  
40 the cities. Instead, the vast majority of our sample work in three cities taken from three  
41 different tiers of the Chinese city tier system. As previously mentioned, the system  
42 consists of four tiers, reflecting differences in income level, population size,  
43 infrastructure and other factors. Thus, although not representing the whole nation, our  
44 sample is sufficiently vast and heterogeneous to represent a good fraction of the Chinese  
45 population.  
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3 Despite the noted limitations, this study offers [some](#) insights into improving  
4 management practice in China. Firstly, our findings suggest intrinsic values, such as  
5 work autonomy, have not taken up an important position among Chinese workers. Good  
6 pay remains the most important work value for all generations. This means that offering  
7 a competitive salary and compensation package is crucial when organisations want to  
8 recruit and retain talented workers in the Chinese labour market. However, focusing on  
9 good pay alone may not continue to attract talent in the Chinese labour market for very  
10 long. Extrinsic values are found to be of lower importance among the youngest  
11 generation in comparison to the previous generations. As Chinese society passes  
12 through the stage of modernisation, an increasing number of Chinese workers may start  
13 focusing on intrinsic values and meaningful work sooner than we expect.

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27 Our findings also suggest that the young generation of China value job security  
28 significantly less than the older generations do. High turnover rates already pose  
29 problems to many foreign companies in China (Froese and Xiao, 2012). Paying  
30 attention to Chinese workers' work value changes may therefore be crucial, especially  
31 for retaining talents belonging to the One-Child Generation. They are in general better  
32 qualified, therefore with more options, and less hesitant to change jobs.

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Furthermore, our study found the One-Child Generation to have less hesitation  
in accepting the benefits of *guanxi*, which traditionally has had strong influence on the  
way rewards and resources are allocated (Bozionelos and Wang, 2007). The current  
study investigated tolerance towards one aspect of nepotism – getting promotion  
through the influence of family or personal connections. This exchange of favour  
among close *guanxi* parties within an organisation leads to negative consequences for  
organisations, by creating a sense of injustice among employees and lowering trust  
(Chen and Chen, 2009). In order to reduce the *guanxi*-related conflict of interests, the

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3 establishment of organisational ethical standards and more transparent decision-making  
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5 are recommended (Chen and Chen, 2009). Foreign, as well as Chinese organisations,  
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7 may thus benefit from enhanced standards and transparency in relation to human  
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9 resource practices and performance management, such as selection, appraisal and  
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11 promotion decision-making.  
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## 14 15 **Conclusion**

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17 While China continues its economic development and increases its market  
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19 competitiveness, the development of its unprecedented generation of only-children as  
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21 workers is an unknown factor. This study contributes to its understanding through a  
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23 comparative study between the work values of the One-Child Generation and those of  
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25 the previous generations. Such comparison became possible only recently – a decade  
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27 since the generation entered the job market. Within the fast-changing work values of  
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29 Chinese workers, we found that while the One-Child Generation place lower  
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31 importance on income and job security in comparison to the previous generations, they  
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33 demonstrate higher acceptance of the negative manifestations of *guanxi* in the form of  
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35 nepotism. The one-child policy has already ended. However, the proportion of the One-  
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37 Child Generation in the Chinese labour market will continue to increase for the next  
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39 decade or so. This implies the need for continuous studies on their values and  
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41 organisational behaviours for effective human resource management.  
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Evidence-Based HRM

Table 1. Profiling of generational clusters and whole sample by socio-demographic characteristics.

	Sample	OCG	SRG	CRG	Significance				
					ANOVA	Tukey's pairwise comparison			Chi-square
Obs.	918	373 (40.63%)	338 (36.82%)	207 (22.55%)		SRG- OCG	CRG- OCG	CRG- SRG	
Male	56.32%	54.69%	53.85%	63.29%					
Single	35.29%	71.85%	10.95%	9.18%	***	***	***		***
Average age	36.16	25.95	38.72	50.39	***	***	***	***	
Education									***
Low level (Primary + Junior high)	8.71%	3.75%	8.28%	18.36%					
High school	18.63%	8.31%	26.04%	25.12%					
Bachelor	26.14%	22.25%	27.22%	31.40%					
Master	39.87%	58.45%	31.66%	19.81%					
High level (MBA + Doctorate)	6.64%	7.24%	6.80%	5.31%					
Monthly income									***
under ¥2000	20.59%	13.94%	26.33%	23.19%					
¥2000–¥4000	48.04%	59.52%	39.05%	42.03%					
¥4000–¥6000	18.19%	17.96%	17.75%	19.32%					
over ¥6000	13.18%	8.58%	16.86%	15.46%					
Average years of employment	10.22	2.59	10.90	22.84	***	***	***	***	

Note. Chi-square test is computed for qualitative data and ANOVA test is computed for quantitative and dummy data. Test results are not significant unless indicated otherwise: \*\*\*Significant at  $p \leq .001$ .

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Table 2. Profiling of generational clusters by job item.

	Proportion			ANOVA	Tukey's pairwise comparison			Kruskal-Wallis
	OCG	SRG	CRG		OCG-SRG	OCG-CRG	SRG-CRG	
1a. Enjoyable work								
Strongly agree	1.88%	3.25%	1.45%					
Strongly agree or agree	35.22%	38.17%	41.06%					
1b. Inspired by job								
Strongly agree	6.97%	7.99%	8.70%					
Strongly agree or agree	52.01%	45.27%	48.31%					
2. Altruism								
Strongly agree	9.92%	7.69%	9.66%					
Strongly agree or agree	54.42%	56.51%	63.77%					
3. Income								
Strongly agree	10.19%	7.99%	11.59%					**
Strongly agree or agree	41.29%	51.48%	56.52%	***	*	***		
4. Job security								
Strongly agree	2.68%	6.51%	6.31%	*	*			***
Strongly agree or agree	30.83%	44.67%	50.49%	***	***	***		
5. Nepotism tolerance								
Totally acceptable	9.65%	6.82%	3.38%	*		*		
Totally acceptable or acceptable	36.46%	24.63%	30.92%	**	**			

Note: Test results are not significant unless indicated otherwise: □ \*Significant at  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*Significant at  $p \leq .01$ , □ \*\*\*Significant at  $p \leq .001$ .

Table 3. Rank order of work values

Value item	OCG	SRG	CRG	All
1. good personal relations with co-workers	3	3	3	3
2. good personal relations with supervisors	8	4	4	4
3. good position in the organisation	5	5	6	6
4. convenient work hours	4	6	7	5
5. good job security	2	2	2	2
6. good pay	1	1	1	1
7. good physical working conditions	7	8	5	7
8. a lot of autonomy	9	9	10	9
9. contributing to society through your work	10	10	9	10
10. a fair amount of recognition for doing a good job	6	7	8	8

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Figure 1. Percentage distributions for the whole sample and by generational clusters

