The Influence of Social Media on the Moral System among the Chinese Z Generation

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Abstract. Under a traditional Chinese society heavily impacted by Confucian ideas, authorities are highly respected. Teachers, the elder ones in a family, and the government usually had incontrovertible power of speech in relevant fields. Chinese society developed a Dovish-oriented moral system--a moral system that considered paying respect and obedience to authorities as morally correct. Nevertheless, those authorities are deconstructing due to the increased media use in the 21st century. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how the use of social media transforms the moral system of the Chinese New Generation. The use of social media increases information transparency and facilitates information diffusion. Since the Z Generation grew up in this fast-paced media environment, the role of the educator and the educated switches in Chinese society, which fatally diminishes the power of those authorities. This paper thoroughly explains how social media deconstruct the traditional Dovish moral system and facilitates establishing a new Division-based moral system among the Chinese Z Generation. It enables individual to recognize and better utilize social media's profound influences on modern society's moral system.

Keywords: Social media; Moral system; Chinese Z Generation.

1. Introduction

A moral system is a code that conducts individuals' actions and choices and ensures they live according to their sense of rightness. It often varies from person to person, society to society, and culture to culture [1]. Nevertheless, using social media shortens the distance between people, decreases the cost of communication, breaks cultural barriers, and enables the collision and fusion of different moral systems. The influence of media use on moral systems is immeasurable, especially during the outbreak of Covid-19, when more and more youngsters are becoming more dependent and active on social media for communicating and gathering information.

The Z generation is the generation born between 1997 to 2012 [2] and is the most active social media user in China. The Sina Weibo (one of the most popular social media in China) data center reported that, in 2020, the post-90s and post-00s became the main force of media usage, accounting for nearly 80 percent [3]. The extensive usage of social media among the Chinese Z generation catalyzes the exchange of moral values between the East and the West and re-establishes Chinese society.

Although there is a lot of research about the deconstruction of traditional society under post-figurative culture [4] and the moral values of the Chinese Z generation [5], there is a lack of research on the transformation of the moral system in China based on a systematic moral theory. This paper will combine the theory of Morality-as-Cooperation and the theory of three figurative cultures to articulate the deconstruction of the traditional Dovish-oriented moral system and the establishment of the new Division-based moral system among the Chinese Z generation under the influence of social media. The second part of this paper will introduce a moral theory used as the foundation. The third section will introduce the traditional moral system under Confucian influences; the fourth section will analyze the deconstruction of this traditional moral system and describe characteristics of the newly-formed moral system in Chinese society.

2. Theoretical Foundation of Morality

2.1 Morality-as-Cooperation Theory

Scholars have struggled with questions like "what is morality," "where does it come from," and "how does it work" for thousands of years—nevertheless. The theory of Morality-as-cooperation (MAC) gave a possible solution to these questions, inspired by the theory of natural selection, the non-zero-game theory, and the idea that morality is somehow related to cooperation. The MAC claims that morality evolves from problem-solving in human society. It is a collection of biological and cultural solutions to the problems of cooperation and conflict recurrent in human social life [6]. It is the solutions used by humans for problem-solving that constitute morality [6]. The theory also claims that there will be more than one domain of morality. The following paragraph will introduce those seven domains of morality--kinship, mutualism, exchange, hawkish, dovish, Division, and possession--in depth [6].

2.2 Seven Domains of Universal Moral Values

The universalism of morality has always been a controversial topic in the study of morality. Some argued that some moral values are universal [7], while others claimed that there are no such universal common moral values [8]. The MAC theory concluded that seven cooperative behaviors could be plausible candidates for universal moral rules [9]. The research has shown that perspectives on these seven cooperative behaviors are universally positive in sixty different societies. These seven behaviors could be summarized into seven fundamental moral values:

1) Kinship: family-centered moral values that promote benefit or avoid harm for their genetic relatives. Related moral behaviors include and are not limited to: caring for offspring, helping family members, and avoiding inbreeding [6].

2) Mutualism: Individuals will benefit more by working together, and, in this situation, promoting the benefit for the whole will be viewed as morally good. Related moral behaviors are: collaborative hunting, helping group members, loyalty to a group, patriotism, and nationalism.

3) Exchange: reciprocal behaviors; returning a benefit to someone who has helped you.

Conflict resolution: Organisms come into conflicts over food, territory, and mate, which involve costs that individuals could benefit from avoiding, such as the cost of time and energy and injury. [9] There are three ways of avoiding conflicts or reducing the cost of conflicts

4) Hawkish and 5) Dovish: Display and Defer

When two individuals come into a conflict, instead of fighting, one could display fighting abilities such as size, weight, age, and experience, and the weaker contestant could show deference to the superior. Thus, the conflict could be solved to benefit both individuals by avoiding harm. The hierarchy or class structure in human society is an expression of this.

6)Division

The conflict could be solved by dividing the source if the resource is divisible (such as food and territory). When the power of two contestants is balanced, the resources will be divided equally. The other solution is to divide the resource in proportion to the power of contestants when there is a superior and an inferior one. Relative behaviors include and are not limited to: the sense of fairness, reactions to unequal treatments, and negotiation.

7) Possession

Possession involves behaviors like recognition of prior ownership and property right, which could be used to solve problems over resources [9].

Meanwhile, Oliver further explained that when individuals face different situations with multiple beneficial and morally correct solutions, they will come up with various choices based on how they prioritize these seven moral values [6].

3. Description of the Traditional Moral System in China

Under the dominance of Confucian values, Chinese society recognized the authority of superiors, such as parents in the family [10], teachers or scholars in academic fields [4], and the government, with total control over speeches, actions, and laws [11]. Since society acknowledged the power of those authorities in corresponding fields, paying respect and obedience (Dovish behaviors) became "morally correct."

3.1 Filial Piety

As Yongbin Wang during the Qing dynasty wrote in The Lunar Night Talk, "of all the virtues, filial piety comes first" [12]. Under the influence of Confucianism, Chinese society recognized the prominent role of parents or elders in a family. They were experienced, knowledgeable, and sophisticated; they often represented "the educator" in a family, and the younger ones were usually "the educated." Their abilities and characteristics granted them charismatic authority--a type of authority legitimized by their extraordinary abilities in Max Weber's theory of Three types of authority--in front of their children. Thus, paying respect and obedience to the elder would be viewed as morally good, while actions of disrespecting or disobeying would usually be condemned.

3.2 Teachers' Traditional and Charismatic Authority

Teachers have authority that is recognized and respected by Chinese society [4]. People acknowledge a person's academic abilities, teaching ability, knowledge in a specific field, and personal characteristics by granting this social identity. Before technology and the internet flourished in China, teachers were the easiest path for students to gather academic information and gain academic knowledge. Phrases like "a teacher for a day is a father for a lifetime" are still used by people nowadays to express their respect for teachers. Thus, the charismatic authority of teachers in Chinese society is conclusive, and actions such as respecting teachers and showing humility in front of teachers were behaviors exalted in the traditional moral system.

3.3 The Government's Rational-Legal Authority

The Chinese government's control over laws and strict censorship of traditional media and speeches granted them rational-legal authority--an authority legitimized by laws and regulations--among the people in a traditional Chinese society [13]. They established a monopoly over the dissemination right and power [7], which means they had absolute power to disseminate, agitate, and mobilize the public [14]. People are expected to respond to the government's call and obey the laws.

Meanwhile, the moral rule of mutualism collaborates with the Dovish moral rule, in which collectivist actions were highly valued in traditional Chinese teaching. Thus, responding to the government's call and showing deference to the government would also be viewed as an expression of loyalty and patriotism.

Overall, Chinese society developed under a Confucian culture that values respect, obedience, loyalty, and patriotism, which promotes the formation of a Dovish moral system. Although some of those Confucian values and practices were criticized at the beginning of 1900, those criticisms only had influences within the academic circle. They did not have a noticeable impact on society. The moral system based on these traditional values still has its binding force even after 1990 [10].

4. Nowadays Situation of the Use of Social Media and the Moral System of the Chinese Z Generation

4.1 Attitude Toward Authorities

In the 21st century, media has become an essential feature of Chinese society, with the Z generation becoming a significant group of media users. The number of monthly active Weibo users reached 511 million, and the number of daily active users reached 224 million in September 2020.

Among those users, the post-90s and post-00s have become the main force, accounting for nearly 80 percent [3]. In 2021, 3,157,767 China Gen Z used social media, which is 30.6 % of Chinese netizens [15].

With the development and spread of the internet and social media, the diffusion of information has been effortless with extensive coverage. In particular, social media such as TikTok, BiliBili, QQ, Weibo, and Youtube provides a route for spreading news and perspectives from different cultural, social, and religious groups in China. Growing up in this environment with a mixture of other moral systems inevitably catalyzed the deconstruction of the traditional moral system and sparked the Chinese Z generation to re-establish a moral system that accords with new values [16].

4.2 Transformation of the Moral System of the Chinese Z Generation

4.2.1 Attitude toward authorities

Influences of media make the traditional moral rules of respecting and obeying superiors less emphasized. On the contrary, it highlights values and behaviors of equality and freedom. Social media provides a platform for everyone to communicate equally, and unequal or demeaning speeches would usually be censured on social media [17]. Growing under this new media environment, the value of equality and liberty is rooted in the minds of the Chinese Z Generation. The prestige of traditional Dovish values is replaced by values of individualism and Division--fairness and equality. According to the research done by Xiong in 2021, more than 80% of post-2000 teenagers disagree that "parent's authority is unquestionable"; 53% said that "they will express their opinions in front of elders (parents, teachers) and point out their mistakes." 79% of respondents agree that "even an authority in a field may not always be right," and 69% said they would "do more research on a topic" after asking experts [5]. The government's authority has also been impacted, while the control of speech is nearly impossible under the impact of social media [11]. Overall, the moral system that exalts dovish behaviors loses its efficacy for the Chinese Z Generation since the new media environment gradually deconstructs those traditional authorities. The following paragraphs will articulate how the use of social media deconstructs parents, teachers, and the government's authority.

Deconstruction of teachers' and parents' authority

Unlike the society during the 1980s, where information was relatively limited, the growth in media use improves communication efficiency and the diffusion of information unprecedentedly. It provides the Chinese Z Generation with more opportunities to explore society and the natural world. Thus, teachers and parents were not the only paths for teenagers to gather information and knowledge [4]. In some cases, the children might be able to gather more up-to-date information and details on social media compared to information and knowledge learned from parents or teachers. This resulted in the formation of a pre-figurative society, where the role of "the educator" and "the educated" switched [4]. Consequently, the charismatic authority of parents and teachers is facing a downfall, and the parent-children or teacher-student relationship is becoming equal.

Deconstruction of government's authority

With more freedom of speech on social media and less government censorship, people no longer passively accept the government's information unconditionally. Social media has become an efficient way to find more first-handed, valuable, and practical information and a platform for requiring the government to handle public affairs better to take care of the interests of more people [13].

Overall, the use of social media among the Chinese Z generation promotes equality and diminishes the power of some traditional authorities. Hence, based on those traditional authorities, the traditional Dovish moral system loses its efficacy among the Chinese Z Generation.

4.2.2 Development of a Division-oriented moral system

Meanwhile, a moral system that accentuates the moral rule of Division is developing and further diminishes the binding force of the traditional moral system. Western movies, lifestyles, and literature obtain values of fairness and equality, which attract Chinese teenagers' attention on social media. Many of the Z Generations are adherents of feminism and oppose those gender stereotypes left over

by the previous generation. Research has suggested that people born after 1990 have a higher acceptance of homosexuality than people born before 1990 [18]. Phrases like "Neither gay nor straight is honorable, but only love is" and "Love is a crash of soul and soul, rather than constrain between gender and gender" are spreading by adolescents and youngsters on social media. Moreover, social media provides those social minorities with a platform to express themselves, which inspired the reconsideration of social norms among the Z generation. Those trends suggested that the traditional moral system of Chinese society is obsolete when foreign values diffuse among the Z generation through social media, and the youngsters are more willing to follow the new Division-oriented system, which aligns better with their moral values.

5. Conclusion

This paper combines the theory of morality-as-cooperation and other research on modern Chinese society and explains how the use of social media catalyzes the transformation of the moral system among the Chinese Z Generation. At the start of the 21st century, Chinese society experienced a significant transformation. With increased information transparency, freedom of speech, and a more inclusive environment on social media, the moral value of Division is rooted in Z Generation's mind. Traditional authorities such as parents, teachers, and the government are deconstructing under the wave of social media. This paper only focuses on one factor that promotes the transformation of the moral system--social media. More impacting factors might collaborate with social media, which needs to be investigated in the future.

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