

Changes of Mongolian Young Adults' Social and Mental Spaces

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Abstract

The purpose of studying young adults' values and their lifetime goals is to characterize their social and mental space in modern Mongolia after the political and economic transition period 30 years ago. Results from recent studies show that Mongolian young adults' social and mental spaces have been significantly changed and are still in the process to find their shapes. On the other hand, Mongolian young adults' values are very much parents- and family-based, and their lifetime goals tend towards improving their current living condition in all possible ways. Contemporary Mongolian young adults, thus, live in different periods of time by sharing their values with the previous generation. This is a common phenomenon for transitional periods and societies but in addition with cultural traditions and Mongolian national mentality, this causes several problems for further development.

Key words: social space, mental space, spiritual, social transition, identification, value, lifetime goal, self-expression, leisure, social activity

Introduction

Since the 1990s, the social transition brought many changes to Mongolians' lives, both at material and mental levels. Material changes are, however, more visible than mental changes since the depth and breadth of mental changes and their effects on human lives are much more difficult to assess and describe. In fact, mental changes are mostly defined through material changes, but they still cannot be defined entirely this way.

The study of Mongolian young adults' social and mental space changes link to the spiritual connection of society and individuals' communication, individuals' mental level study in sociology and philosophy.¹ Individuals' social space-building and spiritual or mental communication connect to their values and lifetime goals. From this point of view, to study the changes of Mongolian young adults' values and lifetime goals after the social transition period is very important. In the 1980s to the 1990s, a number of studies were young adults-related. Even in recent days, the population structure has not changed much. As the 2010 population census shows, 67 percent of the total population is between fifteen and thirty-four years old.² However,

¹ (Academy of Science Mongolia, Philosophy, Sociology and Law Institute 2013).

² Solongo Alгаа. 2004. "The Perspectives on Population number of Ulaanbaatar City Central Districts, 2005–2020", *Mongolian Population Journal* (no. 3), 15. Based on the prepared quantitative survey, in 2016, I added interviews conducted among eight rural area participants. The interviews were conducted in 2012, so I took this survey as a supporting main population.

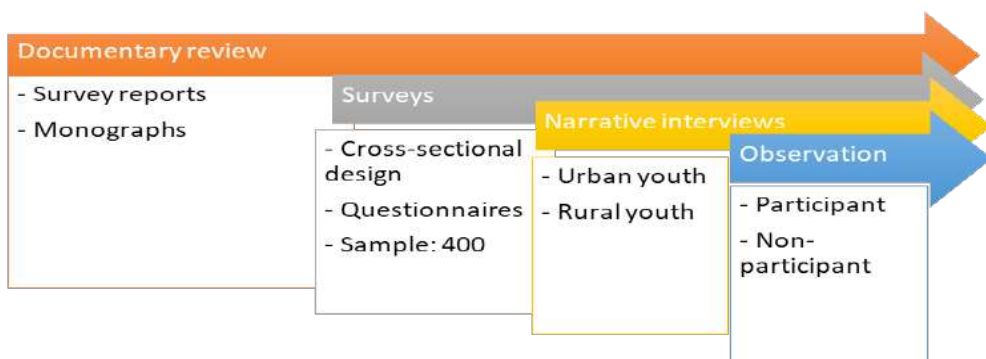
there are not enough studies to explain the effect of the transition period on changing understandings of young adults' values and on their changing lifestyles. There is still need to define the social transition effect on their social and mental space.

Against this backdrop, I conducted my study to identify key factors of changing social spaces of the Mongolian young adults that shed light on the change of people's beliefs, friendship relations, and family lifestyles, and give hints at the way how people select future partners and employees. Is there any specific national mentality or common sense among people living in the transition period?

Methodology

The study of Mongolian young adults' values and lifetime goals was conducted by mixed methods such as cross-sectional surveys, narrative interviews, and participant and non-participant observation among urban and rural young adults from 2012 to 2018. I conducted the quantitative survey on about 400 urban participants who were born between the 1980s and 1990s. In 2012, they were 20 to 30 years old and received their general education during the transition period. At the same time, a number of studies conducted before the 1990s was used to compare and identify the differences or changes of Mongolian young adults' values since the period of social transition.

Figure 1. Study design



In 2012, the cross-sectional survey was conducted among 400 Ulaanbaatar young adults, including students, workers from all economic sectors, and unemployed people. The research question of this survey was to figure out young adults' values by their lifetime goals, social activity and life satisfaction. 400 respondents, between 18 and 34 years old, lived in the urban and rural area, and belonged to different economic sectors. They participated in a face-to-face survey in which they were asked about their most important things, perspectives of their lives, and leisure activities.

Except from this survey, fifteen narrative interviews were conducted in Ulaanbaatar City, Tuv, Bulgan, Arkhangai, and Uvurkhangai aimags from 2012 to 2018 among young adults to compare urban and rural area differences in young

adults' values. Furthermore, participant and non-participant observations have been used. During the interview, I observed the participants' way of talking, their gestures, physical features, their living and working conditions and others.

The observation was carried out among young adults of the academic and business sector to further identify their social activities.

Young Adults' Values and Lifetime Goals

Every generation lives in special circumstances impacting on their age and social status, and these are a product of social, cultural, and historical processes. For instance, young adults plan to get married and have children in any society, but the concept of marriage, their age and the order of marriage is unique. Today, individual values and lifetime goals connect to material sources and power. Someone's plan for the future or his or her lifetime goals can no longer be planned and directed. Of course, the nature and characteristics of one's life were always affected by historical context and previous life experience. Therefore, it is impossible to evaluate young adults as per individuals, they are always affected by their social and historical context (Academy of Science Mongolia, Philosophy, Sociology and Law Institute Mongol Ulsiin Shinjlekh Ukhaany Akademi 2012). The meaning of individual values and lifetime goals are becoming more open, wider, and more pluralist since the social transition in Mongolia. During the socialist era, individuals' minds were restricted and controlled concerning human rights, career, wealth, and power.

The study's findings show that young adults' 5-years objectives are to improve their education, to start a family, and to migrate to work and study in the city. In addition, people's future perspective on life focuses on ensuring their material needs and well-being, such as owning an apartment, starting a business, and promoting their careers. Fulfilling material needs during the next five years is the most important objective among the respondents which indicates that people must feel insecure about their economic situation. In particular, male interviewees feature a strong passion for promoting their career, for social and political activities, and starting a business. This seems to indicate that Mongolians are traditionally patriarchal, consequently having high expectations of men as providers for the family and for society. These high expectations of men could be a reason for many deviations in the current Mongolian society, such as the loss of the gender balance in a family, in education and economic sectors, and even for the high suicide rate of men³ in Mongolia compared to the Eastern Pacific region.

Traditional understandings of Mongolians' personal traits feature the following characteristics: respect for the household head/father, being patriotic, being polite with elders and relatives, worshipping heaven and earth, loving nature, being purposeful and self-confident while believing in supernatural powers, and respecting women for their guardian role at home.

³ <http://apps.who.int/gho/data/node.sdq.3-4-viz-2?lang=en>.

In our imagination, the traditional and national common traits were substantially suited in animal husbandry and nomadic culture, such as adaptability in nature, flexibility, tolerance, suppression of high emotion, creativity, and individual and special team working skills. Today, some significant traditional traits are considered modern again, such as gender equality, purposefulness, and passion for learning and education:

We are going to move to UB city when our children come to school. We have a school in the soum, but the teaching staff and materials are not so good. Now, we have about three years to prepare to move. My husband's and my best and highest purpose is to educate our children.⁴

Individual's value orientation defines one's motif for any decision and his or her worldview. Accordingly, the world of young adults can be divided into social groups. Additionally, the social transition after 1990 influenced the young adults. Furthermore, social change and individual value change can be controlled by the social spheres that are political, economical, social, and cultural. Each sphere has its own conflict with different characteristics. In my study, Mongolian young adults' values and lifetime goals can be identified by their sub-culture. Most critical aspects of young adults sub-cultures are always their clothing, music, movies and other social media usages. Even here belongs young adults' illegal beliefs and behaviour.

Surprisingly, the group most affected by the social transition period were the "conformists". The oldest young adults delegates are now mid-life parents, and they were very tolerant devotees. They did not hear any comments from elders on their music, movies, dressing and their social and political beliefs. This phenomenon can be explained by the socio-economic condition and loss of the socialist point of view:

I was a student from 1995 to 1999. My son did not recognize me on a photograph which was taken in my student years. He asked me if the woman on the photo is my older sister, but my older sister is 20 years older than me. It is because I usually wore my older sister's clothes, no make-up and no hair-dressing. Nowadays, it is a great time, we have several available options. Now, I look at things differently comparing to my studenthood.⁵

Number of behavioral economic research results prove; today's Mongolian young adults are living between multiple choices. These choices provoke many comments from the older generation. It is difficult to make a choice from 100s of opportunities. However, twenty years ago there was no choice, people only needed to survive.

Observations indicated that several young people of the sample were treated for various kinds of addiction such as drugs, computer games, and alcohol abuse etc. Young adults' groups differentiate and at the same time integrate by their social positions. Higher education, social group membership and social power come to individual young adults via wealth and money. In Mongolia, there were more

⁴ Interview with a female, 34-year old local governance officer in Tuv aimag, Lun soum, [August 2016].

⁵ Interview with a female, 42-year old company CEO, in Ulaanbaatar City [August, 2016].

volunteer groups and civil movements in 2018 compared to five years ago. Most of them were established by the highly educated and wealthy young adults. In fact, numerous scholarships require applicants to be socially active, and, as a result, students and young applicants pretend to be working as volunteers.

Another interesting result of the study is that many young people discuss their life decisions with their parents. In addition, some of the interviewees had already strong religious beliefs which, it can be assumed, may even become stronger when people become older. Here, I could also observe a correlation between people's belief system and their values. If their values derive from their parents and families, their religious beliefs are strong. I suppose that this is the case because one of the values of the Mongolian young adults is to respect their parents. Moreover, parents seem to be most influential on young adults. My hypothesis to be tested in further research is, thus, that the strong religious beliefs were related to the parent-young adults' relationships.

The Mongolian young adults tend to use money as a problem-solving tool. However, money is both a problem-solving tool and itself a problem for those who lack money. In this section, I considered that the Mongolian society is a traditional society that refers to the past not to the future, and that the Mongolian society has a strong nomadic tradition. According to my survey result, young adults' values are parents, family and their lifetime goals and they tend to improve their current living conditions in all possible ways. These characters are inherited from their previous generations or parents. In other words, social transition could not make a big change between generations of 80s and 90s young adults. Although, the next generation is rapidly changing from their previous ones. Also, young adults are ready to use money to solve their problems. This could be a basic mental and social environment of corruption in Mongolia. However, our next generation could become different because they have been educated more in Western ways. For instance, young parents became more serious about child well-being and effective ways of child development. Within this context, adolescents and teenagers are facing more opportunities in their future lives, and some of them are spoiling this prospect.

Young Adults' Use of Leisure Time

Leisure time is associated with the livelihood of people and this varies by gender, employment, and age groups. Leisure time variations are more related to different cultures, traditions, and ways of living⁶. In Mongolia, research on the use of leisure time after the social transition is conducted every four years by the National Statistics Office.

The Mongolian young adults spend their leisure time mostly by watching TV, meeting friends, being with their families and doing housework. Generally, only a few of them do sports, hiking, or promoting other hobbies. Comparing gender and age groups, men tend, however, to spend more time in outdoor activities than women,

⁶ Roberts, Kenneth. *Leisure in Contemporary Society*. (Oxfordshire: CABI, 2006).

for instance doing sports, visiting shows and going out with friends, and collecting things. In contrast, women go shopping, have cosmetic services and explore the internet. Membership in volunteer organizations is also more common for women, while men are involved in business-related or political memberships.

The hobby of collecting was not very common among the Mongolian young adults, which may relate to the Mongolian's nomadic lifestyle. During my research, I rarely met people who collected books, stamps, coins, perfumes, notebooks, journals, cigarette lighters, and key chains.

Leisure activity is a key indicator of the quality of life. As mentioned earlier, young adult's lifetime goals mostly tend towards *improving* their livelihood. Accordingly, only a small part of the respondents and interviewees have already lively leisure activities while half of them thinks that their leisure activity is ineffective, and only one fifth of them saw it as effective. 50 percent said that they would spend their leisure time mostly unplanned. Compared to the male respondents, the female respondents have less leisure activities and do not spend their leisure time on their own. Men have more leisure activities but still do not have appropriate places to spend their leisure time. Both men and women lack of ideas on how to spend their time, and financial opportunities. During the survey period, the most important thing is not only the financial difficulties, but also people's self-organization and time planning skills, probably. Finally, more public places for leisure activities are becoming available and several volunteer organizations can support the Mongolian young adults to spend their leisure time in fulfilling ways, today.

Young Adults' Political and Social Activities

During the socialist era, the young adults and highly-educated population had social duties to conduct and had to teach technical skills for workers, and impact on the social development by their own initiative⁷. After the social transition, there was no more official social responsibility. In this period of time, young adults were identified as a population group with special social and political activities.

As previously mentioned, the political culture and the social and political activities of the young adults influence their socio and political activities as much as their personal heritage and family discipline. Additionally, young adult's family discipline, maturity, and ideology influence their socio and political activities. In the socialist era, this tendency was not much considered, but the quantity of membership and social activity was more important⁸. Young adults were less interested in different types of news such as public or every day, science, and political and economic news

⁷ Academy of Science Mongolia, Philosophy, Sociology and Law Institute Mongol Ulsiin Shinjlekh Ukhaany Akademi, *Social Portraits of Contemporary Intellectuals' [Unuugiin Sekheetnii Niigmiin Dur Turkh]*, 1987.

⁸ Academy of Science Mongolia, Philosophy, Sociology and Law Institute Mongol Ulsiin Shinjlekh Ukhaany Akademi, *Mongolian Youths Social Portraits, on the edge of XX-XXI century [XX-XXI zuunii bosgon deerh Mongoliin zaluuchuudiin niigmiin dur torkh]* 2012.

and in political activities⁹. However, the organizations and party members were obliged to inform the public:

Every Monday, we had a morning meeting “Sonsgol” with all factory workers to inform people about the public news, to evaluate the execution of planning, and to inform the workers about some deviations of others. Sometimes this was a useful meeting for workers but sometimes it just seemed “killing time”. In most cases, it was less effective than today’s morning meeting in companies and entities. Back then, we did not criticize the content of the news, but or tried to find the reason or real nature of someone who made a mistake. Remembering today, that process was very inhuman.¹⁰

Although, in the socialist era Mongolians paid close attention to the political education of young people, the basics of sociological knowledge was taught in communist, dramatic, overconfident, and politicized ways. The consequences of these teaching methods are still prevailing. Today, some young adults have a lack of political knowledge and awareness so that they take their decisions or evaluations based on their emotions. For instance, some young adults are very conformist, tolerant, inactive and mindless in the social and political life¹¹. In another side, some of them are too radical, selfish, and risky to the political issues, both attitudes are harmful for the young adults and society.

Since the mid-1980s, young people’s social and political activism and awareness have been revived. Accordingly, young adults have a new perspective on life, society, and the environment. This new perspective enforced the social transition in Mongolia. After the transition, the social groups continued to form their own views and created new civil society units to express their needs and voices. In Mongolia, the UNDP conducted a civil society survey in the 2000s and found that almost half of the population (45,3 per cent) was a member of at least one civil society organization. The survey concluded that the membership of the party was relatively high, 41.5 per cent, trade union membership was 14.1 per cent, and membership in women’s NGOs was 4.4 per cent.¹² According to the official statistics of the National Statistical Office, the number of NGOs has tripled since 2005. In 2005, there were 3,491 units, in 2010, the number raised to 8,909.¹³

⁹ Academy of Science Mongolia, Philosophy, Sociology, and Law Institute Mongol Ulsiin Shinjlekh Ukhaanii Akademi. *Research material of Youths Education and Social Activity [Zaluuchuudiiin bolovsrol niigmiin idevkh]* 1989.

¹⁰ Interview with 54-year female, old former boot factory master in Ulaanbaatar City [August, 2016].

¹¹ Academy of Science Mongolia, Philosophy, Sociology and Law Institute Mongol Ulsiin Shinjlekh Ukhaany Akademi 2012Mongolian Youths Social Portraits, on the edge of XX-XXI century [XX-XXI zuunii bosgon deerh Mongoliin zaluuchuudiiin niigmiin dur torch].

¹² A, Yundendorj, *Criteria of Democratic Governance* [Ardchilsan niigmiin tulguur zarchmuud], 2002.

¹³ https://www.1212.mn/tables.aspx?tbl_id=DT_NSO_2600_009V1&13999001_select_all=0&13999001SingleSelect=_5&01_select_all=0&01SingleSelect=_8&YearQ_select_all=0&YearQSingleSelect=_201804&viewtype=linechart.

The findings of the UNDP study show that young adults' membership in professional and voluntary organizations prevails membership in political parties. In terms of gender, men are more likely to be members of the professional and young adults' organizations, and women are more often involved in the religious, charitable, and women organizations. Unfortunately, there is a lack of information about the NGOs, the civil society organizations' activities and target population information. In 2012, the Mongolian Young adults Federation conducted a baseline survey among young adults to evaluate Mongolian Young adults Federation activities. However, in the baseline survey, 30.6 per cent of the participants said that it is impossible to count the membership numbers because of a lack of information.¹⁴

The classic classification of political sociology divides the social participation into active, moderate, and inactive levels.¹⁵ By these categories, Mongolian young adults are evaluated as one third active, one half moderate and the rest inactive in political participation. The political participation differs based on the education level; highly educated people tend to be more active in the political sphere. Moreover, urban, highly educated, and male young adults are more often involved in politics. Around 10 per cent of the survey participants assessed themselves as politically active, and around 26 per cent of men wanted to make a political career. By contrast, only 8 per cent of the women consider a political career.

There is a slight difference based on age groups among young adults to take their right to vote and to be elected: Young people under twenty-five years tend not to vote while people around twenty-five to thirty are more active voters.

Table 1. Political party membership, by gender

	Sex	
	Male	Female
Member	9.8%	7.1%
Non-member	75.5%	77.8%
Not a member of the political party, but support their activities	9.1%	7.6%
No interest in and support of the political party	5.6%	7.6%

In addition, the social and political activity of young adults did not change rapidly between 2003 and 2018. The proportions of those who were not interested in politics increased, to decrease active interest and to focus only on the issues related to them.

Young Adults' Satisfaction and Cultural Identification

More than half of the participants were dissatisfied with the society they live in. They criticized the social welfare policy, wanted more support of education

¹⁴ Mongolian Youth Organization Mongolyn Zaluuchudiin Kholboo *XXI Century - Mongolian Youth [21-r zuunii Mongolyn Zaluuchud]*, 2011.

¹⁵ Gundsambuu Kh, Chuluunbaatar G Gundsambuu Kh, Chuluunbaatar G. *Mongolian Youths in the Stage of XXI Centure [Mongolyn zaluuchud khoridugaar zuunii bosgon deer]*

and better-paid jobs, and demanded a more flexible credit system. If there is an opportunity for young people to get an influential job for their country, they focus on their education to improve their performance. Young adults expect an increase of work places and salaries and an improvement of the educational sector. Young adults also want to reduce corruption and bribery in all levels of society and demand of protecting the environment. From the point of the participants' view, ten areas need improvement: increasing workplaces / job opportunities, raising salaries, improving and strengthening the educational sector, reducing corruption and bribery, protecting the environment, strengthening justice and equality, improving health sector treatments, promoting businesses, strengthening laws and regulations, developing child protection policy, and protecting and recovering tradition and customs.

According to the results of a survey, young adults' knowledge of tradition and customs is quite different. About 35 per cent have advanced knowledge of the Mongolian history, culture, traditions, and customs while 40 per cent have rather poor knowledge, but are interested in studying their culture. Nonetheless, 75 per cent of all respondents are trying to be aware of the Mongolian history, culture, traditions, and customs. Noteworthy are the differences between people living in the city and in the countryside as in 2018, over 60 per cent of the total population officially lived in Ulaanbaatar city.

Regarding gender-specific differences, men had a 10 per cent higher knowledge of the Mongolian history, culture, tradition, and customs than women. However, this result is based on the self-evaluation of the participants, so it can be a psychological phenomenon of male confidence. Furthermore, the specific age of the participants must be considered as an important factor of advanced knowledge.

Table 2. Young adults' knowledge of Mongolian history, tradition, culture and customs (by location)

	UB city	Rural	Small towns
Good knowledge	30.2%	41.9%	22.7%
Neither good nor bad knowledge but interest	40.3%	39.4%	45.5%
Poor knowledge	24.8%	16.9%	27.3%
No knowledge	4.7%	1.9%	4.5%

This result maintains two sociological broad approaches. The first is cultural globalization¹⁶, which entails cultural diversification, cultural convergence, and cultural hybridization. According to this theory, Mongolians are changing their lifestyles and are hybridizing some elements of everyday life. For example, urban and rural people's clothing, food, and customs are changing. On the other hand, people are trying to develop and differentiate traditional cultural elements, such as national celebrations and national clothing, and try to preserve their cultural heritage.

¹⁶ See Ritzer, George, and Douglas J. Goodman. *Sociological Theory*. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008).

The study reveals that people's knowledge of tradition, culture, and history depends on their personal ties and connectedness to the areas they live in. For those who live in their native areas, their knowledge of history, tradition, culture, and customs is twice higher. This difference in particular occurred in the smaller cities and towns (e.g., Darkhan and Erdenet) where people's knowledge of the Mongolian history, culture, tradition, and customs was comparatively low, which seems to be directly related to the gap between people's origin and their urban lives in the city. Here are two possible explanations: First, the young adults who had grown up in rural areas had much time to spend with their parents, relatives, and neighbors compared to those who grew up in small towns. Second, Mongolian traditions, customs, and cultural elements are more preserved in rural areas. In Ulaanbaatar and small towns, the interaction between people is more independent, the elders' customs and social duties disappeared and elders do not promote their heritage or teach and discuss customs and cultural elements to the next generation. For this reason, young adults' knowledge of tradition, culture, customs, and history is lower in urbanized settings.

The depicted situation emerged after a century-long period of transition of the nomadic culture to settled lifestyle. The citizens are just adapting and urbanizing. In my point of view, since Mongolia does not have a big social differentiation on age groups, education levels, urban and rural areas and others, answers across the surveyed groups were similar. Nevertheless, it was observed during the study that a person's ideology of life in the city is slowly absorbed in the young adults's consciousness. From this point of view, sociologist Gundsambuu's definition of society is applied again. Contemporary Mongolian society is divided into two big sections, nomadic and settled (one state and two civilization/cultures).¹⁷

Conclusion

Shaping young adults' values through their lifetime goals and social activities are made the following points: first, even if the social space changed 30 years ago, young adults' values are still the same as those of their previous generation. This means that most young adults' values are that of their parents, family, and their lifetime goals and these tend to improve their current living conditions in all possible ways. Social transition could not make a big change between young adults born in the 1980s and 1990s, but the next generation is rapidly changing from their previous ones. As well, young adults are ready to use money to solve their problems. This could be a basic mental and social environment of corruption in Mongolia. However, our next generation could become different because they have been educated in Western ways. For instance, young parents became more serious about child wellbeing and effective ways of child development. Within this context, adolescents and teenagers are facing more opportunities in their future lives, and some of them are spoiling this prospect.

¹⁷ Gundsambuu, Khayankhyarvaa. *Mongolyn niigmiin davkhraajil: Khөгжил, khandлага. [Social Stratification in Mongolia: Developments and Tendencies]. (Ulaanbaatar: Mongol Ulsyn Zasgiin Gazryn Kheregiiulegch Agentlag Udirdlagyn Akademi, 2002).*

Since the mid-1980s, young people's social and political activism and awareness have been revived. Accordingly, young adults have a new perspective on life, society, and the environment. This new perspective enforced the social transition in Mongolia. After the transition, the social groups continued to form their own views and created new civil society units to express their needs and voices. This result may lead us to the conclusion that mental change takes more time than social or material change. Moreover, the ability to change lies in the Mongolians' national mentality, but in today's world, how do we raise and create our physical, mental, and social space? As defined by Michel Foucault, space is "the space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space ... we live inside a set of relations." Now, it is a common phenomenon that people live and study abroad. Subsequently, their family members are confronted with foreign cultures and lifestyles. After having conducted this study, I still have some questions, but the questions are more related to Mongolians' meaning of life. Now, I suppose that the social space is easier to define and possible to measure. On the other hand, the mental space is different. It is located inside of the social space meaning, and hard to define, change, and conduct investigation. The social space of Mongolian young adults has changed and found its shape. The mental space change is still in progress, the change is starting in the mind of young generations.

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