

# Generational Differences in Work Values, Perceived Job Rewards, and Job Satisfaction of Chinese Female Migrant Workers: Implications for Social Policy and Social Services

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**Abstract** This cross-sectional survey study is a pioneering attempt to investigate the generational differences in the work values, perceived job rewards, and job satisfaction of Chinese female migrant workers. The study targeted two toy factories in the Guangdong Province of China and recruited a total of 1,307 female workers as participants. Among them were 577 female migrant workers who comprised the target group for this research. The authors hypothesized that the younger generation of female migrant workers would have higher levels of cognitive work values (such as self-enhancement and career development) but lower levels of perceived job rewards and job satisfaction than those of the older generation. The results indicate that there are no generational differences in work values among the three birth cohorts of Chinese female migrant workers. The older generation felt more satisfied with the job rewards that they received, and their sense of job satisfaction was higher than that of the younger generation. Furthermore, the findings showed a substantial positive influence of perceived social job rewards (such as support from co-workers and supervisors) on job satisfaction among the younger generation. The current findings suggest that in China, generational differences in work are affected by both the generation factor and the rural–urban stratification factor. The authors hope that the study will provide a knowledge base for understanding the perceptions of Chinese female migrant workers toward work and for exploring the ways in which new policies and social services can be developed in order to address their needs.

**Keywords** Migrant workers · Chinese females · Work values · Perceived job rewards · Job satisfaction · Generational differences

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## 1 Introduction

Because of the evolution of social, economic, and political environments in China, the assumption that there are manifest intergenerational differences among rural-to-urban migrant workers has become prevalent. In the past, monetary reward was regarded as the paramount factor affecting migrant workers' motivation and perception, but with a heightening concern over quality of life and other psychosocial needs, today's young migrant workers may have a distinct set of vocational attitudes. However, there is a paucity of research examining the differences among various generations of migrant workers. This cross-sectional survey study explored the differences in work values, perceived job rewards, and job satisfaction of Chinese female migrant workers in different age groups. It also investigated the influences of work values and perceived job rewards on job satisfaction among female migrant workers of different birth cohorts. The study targeted two toy factories in Guangdong Province in China and recruited a total of 1,307 female workers as participants. Among them were 577 female migrant workers who comprised the target group for this research. Specifically, the study aimed to test (1) whether younger generations of Chinese female migrant workers have higher levels of cognitive work values than those of older generations; (2) whether younger generations have lower levels of perceived job rewards and job satisfaction than those of older generations; (3) whether cognitive work values are more influential than instrumental and affective work values in positively associating with job satisfaction of younger generations; and (4) whether intrinsic job rewards are more influential than social and extrinsic job rewards in positively associating with job satisfaction of younger generations.

Owing to the burgeoning economy in China, a massive number of workers have migrated from rural areas to cities since the early 1980s. The majority of them have chosen to work in the southern and eastern coastal areas because these locations are the center of Chinese economic development. Among the coastal areas, Guangdong Province receives the largest number of internal migrants who are looking for jobs. Located at the Pearl River Delta, this province is fueled by foreign investment that comes largely from manufacturers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other developed countries. In 2010, approximately 20 % (21.5 million) of the registered population in Guangdong Province consisted of migrants from other provinces (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011). In view of such a massive number of rural-to-urban migrant workers, the demographic trends and social impact of internal migration have been the focus of numerous studies over the past two decades. Nevertheless, research concerning the inter-generational differences among migrant workers is largely lacking. This research area needs to be addressed because of the reasons that follow.

First, most of the attention has been directed to the hardships, maladjustment, deprivation, and discrimination encountered by Chinese migrant workers in general (Chan 2010; Wong et al. 2007) and female migrant workers in particular (Jacka 2006; Pun 2005). However, empirical studies concerning the work experiences of migrant workers of different generations are scarce. This is a notable omission because migrant workers' changing work values, outcomes, and satisfaction may influence their job-related decision-making, career development, life advancement, and family formation in different ways. Understanding their work experiences is indeed a prerequisite for effective policy formulation, social planning, and provision of social services.

Second, there has been a serious shortage of labor in the coastal provinces of China in recent years (Chan 2010). Moreover, workplaces are becoming increasingly diverse in regard to age, and managers and administrators may find it difficult to manage young

migrant workers with changing vocational attitudes and perceptions (Jacobs 2010). There is thus a pressing need to formulate more age-oriented policies in order to establish a productive working environment and a healthy working relationship between managers and laborers. Relevant research findings can yield useful ideas that can be applied to these policies so that they are more effective and more responsive to the needs of migrant workers in different age groups.

Third, Chinese women have long been oppressed in the traditional patriarchal family system, especially in rural China. Women are generally expected to marry in their early twenties, stay at home, and take full responsibility for the children and housework (Pun 2005). Their spouses are likely to ignore their wives' thoughts and concerns. Now, however, urban employment opportunities have opened a door for rural women to experience a sense of autonomy from their parents or spouses, and they finally have a chance to think deliberately about their own lives (Jacka 2006). By examining differences in the work experiences of migrant female workers of different age groups and the relationships between their work expectations and their outcomes, we can broaden our conceptualization of the needs of Chinese female migrant workers. Social service providers and policy makers can use the research findings to devise constructive interventions for helping female migrant workers to better adjust to life and work in urban cities.

Fourth, until now, much of our contemporary knowledge about generational differences in vocational attitudes and perceptions has been embedded in Western academic works; the literature has provided scant evidence about these differences in Chinese societies. Because China has become an economic giant among the nations of the world, the exploration of generational differences that pertain to the workplace is particularly relevant for the Chinese government and for organizations facing structural transformation. Such studies also provide valuable reference materials for Western societies.

After highlighting the potential contributions of this study, the next section of this paper provides an articulation of the theoretical underpinning of this research and a review of the relevant literature on the generational differences in work values, perceived job rewards, and job satisfaction among Chinese employees.

## 2 Literature Review and Hypotheses

This research has been informed by the generation theory. It is commonly recognized that Mannheim (1997) provided the first systematic, theoretical statement about the concept of "generation" in his analysis of social stratification in modern society. Mannheim (1997, p. 291) argued that individuals who share the same generation or age group are provided with "a common location in the social and historical process, and thereby limit them to a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action." The generation theory was further developed by Eyerman and Turner's (1998) modification of Mannheim's conceptualization through Bourdieu's notion of habitus and Inglehart's (1997) theory of intergenerational value change. Eyerman and Turner (1998, p. 93) define generation as a "cohort of persons passing through time who come to share a common habitus, hexis and culture, a function of which is to provide them with a collective memory that serves to integrate the cohort over a finite period of time." In other words, each generational cohort is considered to be embedded within the social and cultural systems that shape the cohort's values, beliefs, expectations, and behaviors. Inglehart's (1997) theory of intergenerational value change is based on two hypotheses. The socialization

hypothesis proposes that the basic values of individuals are largely fixed during the formative years of childhood and adolescence, and those values remain relatively stable throughout their lifetimes. The scarcity hypothesis proposes that individuals place the greatest subjective value on those things that are in relatively short supply. Having tested these two hypotheses, Inglehart's research findings of 43 societies show that generations who grow up during periods of physical and socioeconomic insecurity learn modernist survival values such as materialism, economic determinism, conformity, and respect for authority, while generations who grow up during periods of physical and socioeconomic security learn post-materialistic values such as individualism, egalitarianism, self-expression, and the value of enhancing their quality of life (Egri and Ralston 2004; Inglehart and Baker 2000).

Applying the generational theory to the work setting, supporters of this theory hypothesize that persons who grow up in similar time periods with similar socioeconomic conditions have similar sets of attitudes and expectations, which, in turn, develop their perceptions and choices in the workplace (Benson and Brown 2011; Cugin 2012; Twenge 2010). Furthermore, the values and perceptions of work of younger generations of employees may be quite distinct from those of earlier generations. In fact, generational differences related to work have been the focus of numerous studies conducted in the West over the past decade (e.g., Benson and Brown 2011; Cugin 2012; Twenge 2010), and there has been a growing trend toward studying generational differences related to work in China (e.g., Egri and Ralston 2004; Ralston et al. 1999). However, because few studies have targeted Chinese migrant workers, further research should explore this area.

Chinese and Westerners do not share similar historical, social, and cultural life experiences; thus, the classification of generations widely adopted in Western societies, namely traditionalists, baby boomers, generation X, and generation Y (Benson and Brown 2011), cannot be applied in China in parallel form. Chinese generation cohorts have lived through unique economic, social, and political changes during the Communist Consolidation Era (1950–1965), the Great Cultural Revolution Era (1966–1976), the Economic Reform Era (1977–1985), and the Social Transition Era (1986–present) (Egri and Ralston 2004; Erickson 2009; Ralston et al. 1999; Sun and Wang 2010). During the Consolidation Era, the Chinese Communist Party aimed to supplant traditional Confucian values with Maoist ideology. However, political consolidation through unprecedented economic reforms resulted in widespread famine. In that period, the overall climate of idealism and collectivism undoubtedly affected young people (Sun and Wang 2010), but, at the same time, this generation set survival as their first priority in the face of such economic tragedy (Erickson 2009). The subsequent Great Cultural Revolution Era served only to intensify the political and economic chaos. Members of this generation were taught to embrace a strong belief in self-sacrifice for collective interests and to disregard education as well as anything “old-fashioned” and “foreign” (Erickson 2009). After the death of Mao in 1976, Deng Xiaoping initiated a series of economic reforms and an “open-door” policy, which brought about industrialization and modernization in the coastal areas, followed by a widening gap between rich and poor and greater disparity between rural and urban areas. Chinese youth who experienced these economic and social transformations as they were growing up have been described as individualistic, materialistic, and entrepreneurial (Egri and Ralston 2004). Chinese young people growing up in the Social Transition Era are commonly termed “Little Emperors,” as most of them are single offspring because of China's one-child policy (Erickson 2009). This generation was born into a continuously expanding economy and changing society. With the rapid growth of Internet technology, this cohort has been given a convenient and fast way to acquire information and knowledge

(Kwok 2012). Members of this generation have also been described as more interested in exploring the world, testing new identities, and exercising independence than older generations were (Kwok 2012).

In the paragraphs that follow in the next section of the paper, the indicators (work values, perceived job rewards, and job satisfaction) that were used to assess generational differences related to work in China are described. The hypotheses regarding the impact that generation has upon Chinese female migrant workers' work values, perceived job rewards, and job satisfaction are also presented.

## 2.1 Generational Differences in Work Values

As suggested by Ros et al. (1999), work values refer to the relative levels of importance that an individual assigns to the various aspects of his or her work. Elizur (1984) identified three types of work values, including instrumental values (e.g., pay, benefits, and hours of work), affective values (e.g., relationships with colleagues, supervisors, and others), and cognitive values (e.g., interest, achievement, and independence). This classification was also applicable to the Chinese sample (Elizur et al. 1991). Nielsen and Smyth (2008) found that Chinese employees considered both instrumental values (job stability and income) and cognitive values (professional development) to be significant factors when choosing a job. Wang et al. (2010) discovered that younger workers with a higher level of educational attainment are more concerned about cognitive values (e.g., autonomy and having a meaningful job) than other facets of work values. Consistent with the proposition of the theory of intergenerational value change that physical and socioeconomic security should result in a generation that places more importance on individualistic values, the studies undertaken by Ralston et al. (1999) and Sun and Wang (2010) indicate that the new generation of Chinese employees is more likely to regard self-enhancement as the most important goal in work. Although the assessments of these studies were not designed for migrant workers, their findings can shed light on this target group's generational differences related to work values. The first hypothesis of this study is thus stated as:

**Hypothesis 1** Younger generations of Chinese female migrant workers will have higher levels of cognitive work values than those of older generations.

## 2.2 Generational Differences in Perceived Job Rewards

Perceived job rewards can be defined as evaluative judgments on all the financial and non-financial benefits that employees may receive from their employment relationship with an organization (Newman and Sheikh 2012). According to Newman and Sheikh (2012), there are three main types of rewards: extrinsic, intrinsic, and social. Extrinsic rewards are provided by the organization for the purpose of motivating task performance; these include pay and fringe benefits. Intrinsic rewards are derived from the content of the task itself and include factors such as autonomy, sense of achievement, and motivation. Social rewards are the supportive relationships that arise from interactions with other people such as supervisors and co-workers. Wang et al. (2010) suggests that younger generations of Chinese workers may set higher expectations for the tangible and intangible benefits they can gain from work because they are growing up in an environment of socialist capitalism, in which both individualistic and materialistic values are exalted. A research study on workers' movements in China conducted by the China Labour Bulletin (2012) points out that the new generation of migrant workers who were born in the 1980s and 1990s has a

greater awareness of their legal rights and a sense of entitlement to job rewards and welfare benefits. It has also been reported that the new cohort of itinerant laborers are tiring of working long hours in unfavorable environments with no career prospects (Jacobs 2010). Their higher academic qualifications may make them more depressed with their destiny as factory workers who engage in simple and repetitive, manual tasks for relatively low income (Chan 2010). The second hypothesis is thus stated as:

**Hypothesis 2** Younger generations of Chinese female migrant workers will have lower levels of perceived extrinsic, intrinsic, and social job rewards than those of older generations.

### 2.3 Generational Differences in Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction can be understood as a construct that measures one's subjective evaluation of his or her work experience (Carroll 1969), which is closely related to perceived job rewards and work values (Bokeimer and Lacy 1987; Kalleberg 1977; Mottaz 1985). Again, research findings regarding generational differences in Chinese migrant workers' job satisfaction are meager. The study conducted by Nielsen et al. (2011) indicated that migrant workers with higher levels of education (a characteristic of the new generation) reported lower levels of job satisfaction. Loscocco and Bose (1998) also found that education raises younger Chinese workers' job expectations to the extent that they believe they deserve better job rewards, which leads to job dissatisfaction. The third hypothesis of this study is thus stated as:

**Hypothesis 3** Younger generations of Chinese female migrant workers will have a lower level of job satisfaction than those of older generations.

### 2.4 Influences of Work Values and Perceived Job Rewards on Job Satisfaction

The existing literature reveals that job satisfaction is a function of both work values and job rewards (Bokeimer and Lacy 1987; Kalleberg 1977; Mottaz 1985), but whether there are generational differences in the influences of work values and job rewards on job satisfaction among Chinese employees requires further investigation. As suggested by Kalleberg (1977), work values and perceived job rewards are interconnected. Instrumental work values can be regarded as corresponding to extrinsic job rewards, while affective work values correspond to social job rewards, and cognitive work values correspond to intrinsic job rewards. Different terms were used in order to distinguish work values from perceived work outcomes.

In addition to the generation theory, this research also adopted the self-determination theory (SDT) to examine how cognitive work values and intrinsic job rewards are related to job satisfaction among the new generation of Chinese female migrant workers. SDT proposes that people's behavior is driven and directed by the inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2000). It also considers that social contexts play a significant role in people's intrinsic need satisfaction and, hence, their motivation and performance (Baard et al. 2004). Given a dialectical perspective, which concerns the interaction of an active and self-motivated human nature and social contexts that optimize people's growth and well-being (Ryan and Deci 2000), this theory proposes that people have an intrinsic motivation to learn and to grow even when they are faced with an inadequacy of specific extrinsic rewards. This theory was applied to explore the generational differences in the influences of work values and job rewards on job satisfaction of Chinese employees because recent studies have

indicated that the new generation tends to be more eager to seek self-enhancement in work (Egri and Ralston 2004; Ralston et al. 1999; Sun and Wang 2010). Members of this generation are also given more opportunities to attain personal development (Kwok 2012). As this theory proposes that people who are more inclined to cognitive work values and who are more content with intrinsic work rewards will experience greater job satisfaction (Baard et al. 2004; Vansteenkiste et al. 2007), the fourth and fifth hypotheses are stated as follows:

**Hypothesis 4** Cognitive work values will be more substantial than instrumental and affective work values in positively associating with the job satisfaction of younger generations; and

**Hypothesis 5** Intrinsic job rewards will be more substantial than extrinsic and social job rewards in positively associating with the job satisfaction of younger generations.

### 3 Methods

#### 3.1 Sampling

Data were collected from two toy factories located in Guangdong Province. Systematic random sampling was adopted to collect quantitative data within the two toy factories, which had a total workforce of around 8,000. First, a list of names of front-line workers at the factory was requested. Each list contained approximately 3,000 names of workers and was arranged alphabetically by workers' last names. Next, every third worker was selected from each list and aggregated for a sample of 1,307 female workers and 163 male workers. Among them were 577 female migrants and 103 male migrants. It is understandable that far more females than males were recruited because the majority of females are employed in light-manufacturing industries such as garment, electronic, and toy factories in China (Pun 2005). Only female migrant workers were selected for the present study because of the inadequate sample size of male migrant workers for exploring generational differences.

#### 3.2 Measures

##### 3.2.1 *Generational Cohorts*

There are differences among researchers in regard to the definitions of generational cohorts (Benson and Brown 2011). In order to make comparisons between the results of the present study and previous findings, the classification of three age groups (17–26, 27–39, and 40–65) proposed by Cherrington (1980) was adapted for this research. While considering the definition of youth in China (between the ages of 14 and 28), the mandatory retirement age for female workers (50 years old), and the age distribution of the study sample, the boundaries of the three generational cohorts were set between the ages of 17 and 28, 29 and 40, and 41 and 50, respectively.

##### 3.2.2 *Work Values*

Research participants were asked to rate the importance of the 21 work values proposed by Elizur (1984), namely “instrumental” (salary, fringe benefits, job security, work conditions,



and convenience of hours of work), “affective” (a considerate and fair supervisor, recognition for doing a good job, good relationships with co-workers, and being respected at work), and “cognitive” (responsibility, job status, use of ability, influence in the organization, achievement in work, job interest, esteem, meaningfulness of the job, independence in work, potential for promotion, a prestigious company, and contribution to society). All 21 items are rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale from 1 (disagree very much) to 7 (agree very much). A higher subscale score reflects greater agreement with the importance of the given facet of work values. A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to test the goodness of fit of the above three-factor model. The results of CFA showed that the model fit quite well with the data (GFI = .95; NFI = .93; CFI = .94; TLI = .93; RMSEA = .05). The reliability of “instrumental,” “affective,” and “cognitive” work values was assessed by the reliability alpha coefficient, which yielded good reliability coefficients of .74, .75, and .89, respectively.

### 3.2.3 *Perceived Job Rewards*

Based on Mottaz’s study (1985), the authors developed a scale of 15 evaluative statements regarding eight dimensions of work. All 15 items are rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale from 1 (disagree very much) to 7 (agree very much). A higher total scale score reflects greater agreement with the acquisition of the job reward in work. An Exploratory Factor Analysis was conducted to examine the underlying factor structure of the scale. The threefold factor structure of the scale was similar to the one suggested by Mottaz (1985). Factor I accounted for 39.7 % of the variance and contained six items related to pay, fringe benefits, and promotion. Factor II accounted for 4.5 % of the variance and contained six items related to work environment, supervisor support, and co-worker support. Factor III accounted for 3.1 % of the variance and contained three items related to achievement and recognition. Following the conceptual model proposed by Mottaz (1985), Factor I was labeled “extrinsic job rewards,” while Factor II and Factor III were labeled as “social job rewards” and “intrinsic job rewards,” respectively. Furthermore, the reliability alpha coefficients of the three subscales (extrinsic = .85; social = .81; intrinsic = .72) were all found to be satisfactory.

### 3.2.4 *Job Satisfaction*

Kalleberg’s (1977) five-item scale was adopted to measure each participant’s overall job satisfaction. Sample items include “How satisfied are you with your job?” and “Would you recommend the job to a friend?” All five items are rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale from 1 (disagree very much) to 7 (agree very much). The total scores range from 5 to 35. A higher total score reflects greater job satisfaction. The composite score of the five items yielded a reliability alpha coefficient of .72.

### 3.2.5 *Control Variables*

In order to rule out the influences of family structure and socioeconomic status (Cogin 2012), the key sociodemographic variables in relation to marital status, number of children, educational level, and income were controlled during data analyses.



### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Survey and Behavioral Research Ethics Committee of The Chinese University of Hong Kong. With permission from the factory managers, two trained research assistants held two instructional sessions per day to explain the purpose of the study and to obtain informed consent from all research participants. Around 40 participants joined each session, and all questionnaires were completed within a month. The instructional sessions were held in a private conference room at each factory, and the participants filled in the questionnaires anonymously in that room. During the entire process, the research assistants stated clearly that the participants were not filling out the surveys as representatives of the company and encouraged the participants to answer in accordance with their personal thoughts. The workers were neither rewarded nor compensated for their participation in this study.

The data collected were analyzed by the statistical software PASW 17.0. Descriptive statistics were used to display the sociodemographic information. Multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVA) and post hoc group comparisons using the least significant differences test were used to test hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to test hypotheses 4 and 5. The possibility of multicollinearity was checked. It was found that all variance inflation variables were close to one, so the predictors did not depend linearly on each other.

## 4 Results

Table 1 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of the research participants. Of the 130 migrant females between 17 and 28 years old, nearly half were single; the majority of the 294 females between 29 and 40 years old and the 153 females between 41 and 50 years old were married. Most of the married migrant females had one or two children. The levels of educational attainment among the youngest generation were higher than those of the older generations on average. All generational cohorts reported monthly salaries within RMB¥1,000 (USD162.09) and RMB¥1,600 (USD259.34), but higher monthly salaries were received by the oldest generation.

In response to hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, MANCOVA was used to test the differences among the Chinese female migrant workers of different age groups in terms of work values, perceived job rewards, and job satisfaction. A significant Wilks' lambda effect (value = .92,  $F = 2.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ) was found. The results of post hoc group comparisons are summarized in Table 2. Contrary to hypothesis 1, there were no significant differences in cognitive work values among the oldest age group, the middle age group, and the youngest age group. Hypothesis 2 was partially supported because the oldest generation felt more satisfied with all the extrinsic, social, and intrinsic job rewards that they received than those of the middle age group or the youngest age group, while there was no significant difference between the middle age group and the youngest age group. Hypothesis 3 was supported to a great extent as both the oldest age group and the middle age group possessed a higher level of job satisfaction than that of the youngest age group.

In response to hypothesis 4, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to test if cognitive work values were more influential than instrumental and affective work values in positively associating with job satisfaction of younger generations of Chinese female migrant workers. Table 3 indicates that contrary to hypothesis 4, the job satisfaction of the youngest, middle, and oldest age groups of female migrant workers was

**Table 1** Sociodemographic characteristics as a percentage of the sample

Sociodemographic characteristic	Group 1: Aged 17–28 (n = 130)	Group 2: Aged 29–40 (n = 294)	Group 3: Aged 41–50 (n = 153)
<i>Marital status</i>			
Single	48.1	1.3	0.7
Married	51.2	95.5	96.0
Divorced/widowed	0.7	3.2	3.3
<i>Number of children</i>			
0	55.0	4.9	1.4
1	35.1	44.5	45.7
2	6.3	39.2	41.3
3 or above	3.6	11.4	11.6
<i>Educational level</i>			
Elementary or below	4.7	20.0	38.6
Middle school	67.2	72.5	54.5
High school	28.1	7.5	6.9
<i>Monthly salary (RMB ¥)(US dollars)</i>			
1,000 or below (162.09 or below)	4.8	5.6	2.8
1,001–1,200 (162.25–194.51)	41.9	37.5	25.9
1,201–1,400 (194.67–226.92)	25.0	24.7	31.5
1,401–1,600 (227.08–259.34)	16.9	16.0	22.4
1,601–1,800 (259.50–291.76)	4.0	6.6	4.2
1,801–2,000 (291.92–324.18)	4.0	6.6	8.4
2,001 or above (324.34 or above)	3.4	3.0	4.8

positively associated with their cognitive work values instead of with their instrumental and affective work values. However, the association between cognitive work values and job satisfaction was no longer significant when including various aspects of perceived job rewards.

In response to hypothesis 5, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine if intrinsic job rewards were more influential than social and extrinsic job rewards in positively associating with job satisfaction of younger generations of Chinese female migrant workers. Table 3 shows that the hypothesis was not supported. In the youngest age group, social job rewards were found to be positively associated with job satisfaction. In the middle age group, all the extrinsic, social, and intrinsic rewards were found to be positively associated with job satisfaction. In the oldest generation, both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards were found to be positively associated with job satisfaction.

In summary, the results indicate that there are no generational differences in work values among the three birth cohorts of migrant female workers. The oldest generation felt most satisfied with all the extrinsic, social, and intrinsic job rewards that they received, while the youngest generation had the lowest level of job satisfaction. The findings also

**Table 2** Test of the differences in work values, perceived job rewards, and job satisfaction among the female migrant workers of different age groups by MANCOVA

Variable	Group 1: Aged 17–28 (n = 106) Mean (SD)	Group 2: Aged 29–40 (n = 248) Mean (SD)	Group 3: Aged 41–50 (n = 123) Mean (SD)	F	Post Hoc group comparisons based on estimated marginal means
<i>Work values</i>					
Instrumental	29.39 (4.40)	28.84 (4.83)	28.70 (5.12)	.09	No differences
Affective	23.07 (3.12)	22.45 (3.82)	22.59 (3.73)	.19	No differences
Cognitive	62.05 (9.72)	59.51 (10.79)	61.27 (10.18)	1.82	No differences
<i>Job rewards</i>					
Extrinsic	20.43 (7.05)	21.00 (7.85)	24.11 (8.21)	4.45*	Group 3 > Group 2
Social	25.02 (6.91)	26.83 (6.93)	29.72 (5.58)	7.60***	Group 3 > Group 2 Group 3 > Group 1
Intrinsic	11.33 (4.11)	11.95 (4.32)	13.24 (4.37)	2.12	Group 3 > Group 2
Job satisfaction	16.75 (5.81)	19.84 (6.12)	21.25 (5.36)	6.32**	Group 3 > Group 1 Group 2 > Group 1

Each column presents the results of MANCOVA that was used to examine the differences among the migrant female workers of different age groups, with the sociodemographic variables including family structure, education, and monthly income treated as the covariates. Instrumental = Instrumental Work Values (range: 5–35); Affective = Affective Work Values (range: 4–28); Cognitive = Cognitive Work Values (range: 12–84); Extrinsic = Perceived Extrinsic Job Rewards (range: 6–42); Social = Perceived Social Job Rewards (range: 6–42); Intrinsic = Perceived Intrinsic Job Rewards (range: 3–1); Job Satisfaction (range: 5–35)

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

show the substantial positive influence of social job rewards among the youngest generation, while all the extrinsic, social, and intrinsic rewards have positive influences on job satisfaction among workers in the middle generation. The oldest generation considered both extrinsic rewards and intrinsic rewards to exert positive influences on their job satisfaction.

## 5 Discussion

Previous studies found that the new generation of Chinese employees is more likely to set a higher priority on cognitive work values such as self-enhancement and career development (Ralston et al. 1999; Sun and Wang 2010). They also have a lower level of satisfaction with the rewards and enjoyment derived from their work (Jacobs 2010; Loscocco and Bose 1998; Nielsen et al. 2011; Wang et al. 2010). These previous findings support the assumption that the generation in which Chinese people grew up appears to be essential to understanding their changing work attitudes and perceptions. They also suggest that the new generation of Chinese employees is similar to that of Western employees, especially in respect to individualistic values and behavior (Erickson 2009; Ralston et al. 1999; Sun and Wang 2010). However, most of these studies have targeted Chinese employees with a higher level of educational attainment and position within organizations. The present study set out to examine whether there are generational differences in work attitudes and perceptions among Chinese female migrant workers, a huge group that is serving as the

**Table 3** Prediction of job satisfaction from work values and perceived job rewards among the female migrant workers of different age groups by hierarchical multiple regression

Predictor	Criterion: Job satisfaction					
	Group 1: Aged 17–28 (n = 106)		Group 2: Aged 29–40 (n = 248)		Group 3: Aged 41–50 (n = 123)	
	Model 1 $\beta$	Model 2 $\beta$	Model 1 $\beta$	Model 2 $\beta$	Model 1 $\beta$	Model 2 $\beta$
<i>Control</i>						
Marital	-.17	-.15	-.00	-.09	-.07	-.04
Children	.23	.12	.04	.02	.06	.04
Education	-.21*	-.17*	-.07	-.01	-.10	.04
Income	.19*	.06	.21***	.11*	.24**	.17*
<i>Work values</i>						
Instrumental	-.15	-.03	.07	-.00	.07	.00
Affective	-.18	-.23 <sup>+</sup>	-.08	-.04	-.14	-.02
Cognitive	.28*	.10	.22*	.06	.31*	.09
<i>Job rewards</i>						
Extrinsic		.08		.33***		.31*
Social		.38**		.18**		-.01
Intrinsic		.18		.13 <sup>+</sup>		.23 <sup>+</sup>
$\Delta R^2$	.04	.28***	.05**	.27***	.07*	.17***

Each column is a regression equation that predicts job satisfaction, with the control of the socio-demographic variables including family structure, educational level, and monthly income. Instrumental = Instrumental Work Values; Affective = Affective Work Values; Cognitive = Cognitive Work Values; Extrinsic = Perceived Extrinsic Job Rewards; Social = Perceived Social Job Rewards; Intrinsic = Perceived Intrinsic Job Rewards

<sup>+</sup>  $p = .06$ ; \*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

backbone of China's manufacturing sector but that has been neglected in previous investigations. The most important findings of this study are that there are no generational differences in regard to work values and some generational differences in perceived job rewards and job satisfaction among the three birth cohorts of the Chinese female migrant labor force. The current findings remind us that it is questionable to generalize any conclusion about the intergenerational shift in work values among Chinese urban employees to the whole population. As Chan (2010) argued, the movement of the massive number of the rural population to urban cities has turned the rural–urban dual structure into a tripartite structure, with migrant laborers as the new social group in urban areas. Unlike the employees in the urban *hukou*, the “urban” laborers coming from rural areas have different patterns of shifts in intergenerational work orientations and perceptions. As such, generational differences in work in China are affected by both the generation factor and the rural–urban stratification factor. We should take these two factors into consideration when formulating social policies and conducting further research. There is also a need to extend this research topic to the exploration of the ways in which the generation effect and rural–urban stratification effect interact to influence the work attitudes and perceptions of different age groups of Chinese migrant workers.

This study indicates the existence of both intergenerational continuation and intergenerational change in attitudes and perceptions about work among migrant workers. Regarding the intergenerational continuation, the findings show similarities in work values among different age groups of Chinese female migrant workers. One of the possible explanations for the similarities in work values is that the three birth cohorts of female migrants might have similar life experiences in the process of internal migration. Manifestly, Chinese rural migrant workers are not only a group of people who engage in lower-level occupations but also a group that is being socially, economically, and legally marginalized (Chan 2010). In contrast to the new generation of urban youth, they are still encountering various forms of socioeconomic insecurity in the Social Transition Era of China. With lower levels of educational attainment and fewer social resources, different age groups of female migrant workers simultaneously set “survival” as their first priority (Kwok 2012). Considering money as crucial for gratifying their immediate needs, different generations of migrant workers may attach a similar level of importance to income and work-related benefits. Women in the workplace also actively render sisterhood networks and preserve relationships with supervisors and co-workers for securing jobs and attaining social support (Pun 2005), and this can explain why different generations of female migrant workers have similar levels of affective work values.

Another possible explanation for their similarities in regard to work values is that different age groups of Chinese female migrant workers in fact hold similar levels of cognitive work values. The results can be understood in view of the cultural influence and social development of China. In addition to fulfilling their “survival needs,” different generations of rural migrant workers might have the same wish to strive for self-enhancement and upward social mobility in order to change their destiny. This can apply to both younger and older generations (Egri and Ralston 2004). Chinese children growing up at different times have been taught to connect personal development with good career prospects and elevation in social status (Sun and Wang 2010). Furthermore, Chinese women living in rural areas have long been suppressed under the traditional patriarchal family system (Pun 2005). Through internal migration to urban cities with more employment opportunities, they might become more enthusiastic about developing capabilities and enhancing their social mobility. Moreover, they have already been through a number of hardships in the migration process, and it is reasonable that they want to prove to themselves their competence and self-realization through work (Jacka 2006). This can explain why different generations of female migrant workers have similar levels of cognitive work values.

As far as the intergenerational change is concerned, the current findings show that younger female migrant employees are more likely to express less contentment with job rewards and job satisfaction. The relationship between generation and perceived job rewards and satisfaction could be explained in two ways. First, given their birth in later cohorts, younger women might harbor greater expectations than older women about the opportunity to acquire various aspects of work rewards and job satisfaction. These considerations reflect that younger generations, unlike older ones, seem to perceive work opportunities as abundant because of the labor shortage in the coastal provinces (Jacobs 2010). Therefore, younger workers believe they have plenty of opportunities to earn more money, pursue personal goals, and acquire a better working environment in other companies, so they may feel dissatisfied with their present working conditions.

Second, comparatively speaking, younger migrant workers are able to make the transition from rural to urban life more easily than are older migrant workers, so they might feel less gratitude than their older counterparts. The migrants of the past found themselves

in a position inferior to that of urban residents (Pun 2005). They needed to work very hard simply to survive in the host society; thus, it is more likely for older generations to feel content with the benefits they receive, and they also demand much less from their jobs. In contrast with the past strenuous migration experience, the new generation undergoes a smoother acculturation process, which emphasizes the improvement of quality of life as promoted by television advertisements and popular programs. As a result, they may integrate themselves into urban society more quickly and comprehensively (Jacka 2006). They may also adopt the urban ideology of work and set higher expectations for what tangible benefits and subjective well-being they can gain from their jobs; thus, they may feel more discontent with their current situations.

In addition to the coexistence of intergenerational continuation and intergenerational change, the current findings indicate that cognitive work values are positively associated with job satisfaction among all three of the birth cohorts of female migrant workers. These results challenge the previous findings that instrumental work values are more influential than cognitive work values in predicting job satisfaction of Chinese employees (Newman and Sheikh 2012; Wang et al. 2010). They imply that female migrant workers with stronger cognitive work values may strive for a sense of personal achievement by actively participating in job-related activities, which in turn enhances their job satisfaction (Baard et al. 2004; Vansteenkiste et al. 2007). They also reflect that different age groups of migrant females are eager to develop a healthy self-concept through experiencing different aspects of cognitive work values in job activities, and they have a greater tendency to feel content with their working conditions by having a positive self-concept about work (Ryan and Deci 2000).

It is important to note that among the three aspects of perceived job rewards, social job rewards were positively associated with job satisfaction of the youngest generation of migrant females. The current results are inconsistent with the previous findings that younger generations value social interactions at work less than older generations do because younger generations are more independent and self-reliant (Egri and Ralston 2004; Kwok 2012; Ralston et al. 1999). Having left their hometowns, young migrant females often lack sufficient social support from their own families and peers. This can explain why the acquisition of a stronger emotional bond with supervisors and co-workers has a profound influence on younger generations of female migrant workers. However, while older migrants may have already established their own social networks and received adequate social support, the influence of social job rewards on job satisfaction may be reduced among them. Moreover, having borne the heavy responsibility of providing financial support for their migrant or left-behind children, older generations of migrant females may seek to maximize their extrinsic job rewards in order to improve their living conditions.

## 6 Implications for Social Policy and Social Services

Nowadays, much emphasis has been placed on the personal development and career advancement of the new generation of Chinese urban employees because it is believed that they have strong entrepreneurial value orientations, and they can make a significant contribution to China's economic development (Egri and Ralston 2004; Ralston et al. 1999). They are regarded as the future pillars of society. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that "the 'Made in China' success story of the past two decades is the story of rural migrant workers toiling for subsistence wages to produce the lowest-priced exports to the world" (Chan 2010, p. 660). Therefore, they deserve better protection in regard to human rights

and a substantial enhancement of welfare benefits, but the fact is that they still receive poorer welfare benefits than their urban counterparts under the present household registration system (Wong et al. 2007). They are also blamed as the causes of social problems, so a hierarchical, control-oriented, top-down approach to internal migration management is still adopted by the government (Pun 2005). Unavoidably, the massive number of migrant workers is forming a new working class. The findings of this study clarify that cognitive work values (such as use of ability, achievement in work, and contribution to society) are held by different birth cohorts of female migrant workers. Just as urban employees are, they also should be regarded as assets to society because they can create new perspectives that bring about positive social transformations. The current findings also indicate that younger generations of female migrant workers are more discontented with the benefits of work than are older ones. With increased expectations and aspirations, higher levels of education, and frequent use of electronic media, this new generation is more ready to engage in worker movements (China Labour Bulletin 2012). There is thus an urgent need for the Chinese government to formulate social policies that can balance the interests of different generations of Chinese urban and rural migrant employees. The government should provide a platform for migrant workers to express their opinions concerning their rights as citizens, work adjustments, and life adjustments. They should also be appointed as members of different consultative bodies so that they can offer useful ideas about the restructuring of existing service programs and the generation of new policies in response to their changing work experiences.

The findings of the present study suggest that extrinsic rewards still have a considerable influence on job satisfaction of older migrant workers in China. In addition to the traditional Chinese cultural belief that money can help satisfy various needs and their heavy responsibility to send remittances to their families in their hometowns, their unwillingness to participate in social insurance programs is another factor that may drive them to concentrate on short-term cash gains and fringe benefits (Xu et al. 2011). As many migrant workers do not believe that their welfare will be protected or their contributions safeguarded because of corruption and mismanagement (Wang 2011), they try to get as many extrinsic rewards as possible. Therefore, much follow-up is required by social workers to urge the government to improve the employment and social security systems.

The present findings provide insight that might help social service policy makers to improve the lives of migrant female workers. The findings remind us that various generations of migrant females might have different work perceptions that service providers should heed if they wish to address these workers' psychosocial needs. Besides addressing their financial needs, service workers should also strive to equip migrants with life skills so that they can pursue worthwhile goals at work and feel satisfied with their achievements. This requires a paradigm shift from the orientation of managerial control over migrant workers (Pun 2005) to an orientation that seeks to address their cognitive work values (Wong and Leung 2008). Emphasis should also be placed on building connections among co-workers, acknowledging that the heart of work efficiency lies in their cooperation and mutual support. Non-governmental organizations can also play an important role in providing life-skills development programs for migrant workers.

As shown in the findings, the youngest generation of female migrant workers has a lower level of job satisfaction than do older generations, but they may find it difficult to leave their low-paid and low-skilled posts and seek jobs in the tertiary sector because they have fewer resources and supports on which to draw. Mutual aid can instill hope among young migrants who encounter such difficulties and challenges. While living within the constraints of cultural traditions that exalt marriage and childrearing, this group of females



can rarely find peers who understand their thoughts and feelings, so they may feel isolated. In this regard, mutual aid groups should be launched to provide a platform of trust where they can support and empower each other (Wong and Leung 2008). Such groups can facilitate the ability of these workers to discover and develop their competencies, equip themselves with knowledge and skills, and establish social relationships outside the family in order to enhance their employability in a post-industrial society.

## 7 Limitations of the Study

Three limitations should be considered when interpreting the data of this study. First, the generalizability of the findings should be interpreted with caution because they were based on a non-randomized sample of female workers who were employed at two toy factories. However, we found that the use of non-probability sampling methods is common in research about Chinese migrant workers' employment experiences because of the difficulty of accessing them (e.g., Chan and Qiu 2011; Nielsen et al. 2011). Second, a cross-sectional quantitative study with data on workers' different ages cannot rigorously demonstrate the generational differences in migrant female laborers' work experiences because of the difficulty of differentiating the generation effect from the age effect (Twenge 2010). A time-lag design that targets workers within the same generation at different points in time is hence preferable. Nevertheless, time-lag studies on the generational differences in Chinese migrant workers are very rare, while the cross-sectional design has been widely adopted in related studies (e.g., Benson and Brown 2011; Cugin 2012). Third, there might be strong spillover effects of perceived job rewards on job satisfaction because the greater the perceived job rewards one obtains, the greater the satisfaction with the job will be in general. It was observed that, on the one hand, the perceived job rewards were considered a major determinant of job satisfaction traditionally (Bokeimer and Lacy 1987; Kalleberg 1977; Mottaz 1985); on the other hand, there were conflicting views on the role of perceived job rewards in relation to job satisfaction (Hofmans et al. 2013). The recent findings of Hofmans et al. (2013) have indicated that there are important individual differences in the relationship between specific dimensions of perceived job rewards and job satisfaction. Future studies should thus take into consideration the possible spillover effects. Other dependent variables such as organizational commitment and job performance can also be used in addition to job satisfaction.

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