


Book Review: Little Emperors and Material Girls: Sex and Youth in Modern China

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12/06/2015

Little Emperors and Material Girls discusses the sexual behaviour of young women in Beijing and Shanghai, and tries to draw parallels to the West. In order to deal with the lack of official statistics, Steinfeld, who worked in China as a journalist for many years, relies on interviews and personal observations. Whilst compulsively readable and entertaining, the book falls short of producing an entirely authoritative text, writes **Isabel López Ruiz**.

Little Emperors and Material Girls: Sex and Youth in Modern China.
Jemimah Steinfeld. I.B.Tauris. 2015.

9781780769844[1]

Discussing sex and relationships in a country as large and diverse and China was never going to be easy. It is no surprise, therefore, that Jemimah Steinfeld's attempt, whilst compulsively readable and entertaining, falls short of producing an entirely authoritative text. *Little Emperors and Material Girls* will largely appeal to a non-specialist audience. Those looking for an academic and fully comprehensive overview of attitudes towards sexuality in the Asian giant would be better advised to look elsewhere.

Nevertheless, Steinfeld clearly knows what she is talking about. Having lived in China for several years, working as a journalist, and holding an MA in Chinese Studies from SOAS, she is well acquainted with both the theory and the reality of life in China. It will probably not change 'the way you see China' (unless you have been living under a rock for the past 50 years and/or hold extremely antiquated views about Asia's largest country), but it will certainly offer you an insightful, albeit often predictable, glimpse into the minds of China's youth.

Steinfeld does deserve some credit, as *Little Emperors* comes up against two very important and seemingly inevitable obstacles. Firstly, the reluctance of many interviewees to disclose details about their intimate lives. For a book that is supposedly focused on 'Sex and Youth', the sections concerning intimacy and sexual practices offer no surprising findings. Secondly, the lack of official statistics and information disclosed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaves the text sounding empty. Instead, Steinfeld fills the void with excessive hearsay and conjecture, resorting to friends of friends and stories she has heard about in passing. Phrases such as 'He reported that she had said' (161), 'I heard about' (170), and 'arguments I have heard from other Chinese' (126) only serve to discredit her arguments and leads the reader to question the factual basis of her statements.

That China's younger generations are gradually becoming more and more 'westernised' should not come as a surprise to anyone. Ironically, the most interesting sections in this text concern young people's relationships with the CCP, perhaps because the enlightening revelations about both party allegiance and divergence are backed up with reliable statistics about party membership. Nevertheless, as I read through the countless experiences of young people as they try to find who they really are and advance into adult life, I found many parallels with my own life—proof that China is not altogether as removed or different as one would think. Whether it be having to juggle family and professional commitments or the arduous search for a long-life partner, China's youth are not even 'Western', they are just human.



The volume's central section, 'Sex and Sexuality' dips briefly into fascinating topics before quickly dipping back out. Interviews with members of underground rock bands are awkwardly merged with discussions about safe sex and antidepressants. When discussing the issue of homosexuality in China, Steinfeld makes some questionable interpretations, comparing the 20% of Chinese people who as of 2007 believed 'there was nothing wrong with [homosexuality]' (141) to 'just' 37% of Americans who believe it is a sin. Whilst some of China's statistics are certainly shocking, the US possibly is, in this respect, the incorrect Western counterpoint. Unwittingly, once again, Steinfeld reveals just how similar we all are.

Little Emperors is further undermined by Steinfeld's generic statements which can be found scattered along the text. Vague sentences such as 'China's youth are chatting and flirting online' (33) or 'Promiscuity is on the rise' (107) add nothing to her arguments, which are often hastily linked together in an effort to make each chapter flow on from each other. Not only is this disconcerting, but it also makes the text's structure seem very artificial. Within certain sub-sections, one can also find anecdotes which quickly diverge into completely unrelated topics: For example, the life story of a gay man who cannot come out to his family suddenly turns into a discussion of China's boarding schools.

In interviewing mainly young people from either Beijing or Shanghai, arguably the country's most 'Westernised' cities, Steinfeld also limits her scope to an alarming degree. In the introduction, she defends her decision to choose those who 'were central rather than peripheral' (8) and who 'had the resources to participate in new cultural activities' (7). However, I feel Little Emperors could have benefitted from contrasting points of view and a geographically broader selection of interviewees. The title of the book leads the reader to think Steinfeld will be evaluating attitudes towards sex and relationships throughout China as a whole, but this is not the case. This was disappointing, as I believe she missed out on a fantastic opportunity to explore the contrasts between different regions. Unsurprisingly, the picture painted is largely homogeneous, as Steinfeld's interviewees all acknowledge the impact of Western trends on their day-to-day lives.

However, there is a place for Little Emperors in the current literature about China, especially with regards to its younger generations. Steinfeld's text will definitely appeal to a mass audience and there is no doubt that many will use it as a springboard for further research. Given China's leading role in world affairs and the growing need for intercultural communication, readers are sure to welcome Steinfeld's volume as a small window into a very large topic.

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