Gladys Chicharro, *Le fardeau des petits empereurs – Une génération d'enfants uniques en Chine* (The burden of little emperors: A generation of single children in China)

Nanterre, Société d'ethnologie, col. « Recherches sur la Haute Asie », 2010, 313 pp.

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5589>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.5589

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 July 2011

Number of pages: 78-79

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Pierre-Henry De Bruyn, « Gladys Chicharro, *Le fardeau des petits empereurs – Une génération d'enfants uniques en Chine* (The burden of little emperors: A generation of single children in China) », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2011/2 | 2011, Online since 30 June 2011, connection on 21 September 2020.

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5589> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.5589>

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Gladys Chicharro, *Le fardeau des petits empereurs – Une génération d'enfants uniques en Chine* (The burden of little emperors: A generation of single children in China)

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Gladys Chicharro's book is one of those that are so well written they make for compelling reading. From the outset, the reader is plunged into her research adventure and is taken by hand, as it were, through the 300-odd pages in which the author introduces those she met during her inquiries, highlighting the places they inhabit, the things they say, and the cultures they spawn. Her study is deeply embedded in a specific area of China, namely Primary School No. 12 in Langfang City, between Beijing and Tianjin. If the reader is unable to place Langfang at the outset of this book, there is no need to worry, as Chicharro introduces it with undeniable talent.

Over a 50-year period, Langfang's population has risen from 5,000 to 500,000. It is thus a new town, one that can perhaps be somewhat, or even frightfully, banal. However no reader of Chicharro's account will now be able to take the Beijing-Tianjin train without stopping for at least a few hours at Langfang. With a skilful use of official slogans, Langfang gradually turned itself, as it claims, into a "sparkling pearl of the Beijing-Tianjin corridor," a "new, prosperous and civilized city" boasting "the longest pedestrian road in China" (p. 32), a place run by a talented and ambitious mayor seeking to "forge a green Silicon Valley in China and transform Langfang into the prettiest northern Chinese city" (p. 34). By playing up its proximity to both Beijing and Tianjin and by offering to service them (through, for instance, locating branches and residences for universities based in the two megalopolises), Langfang might be able to become a free port for the whole of China. The reader's desire to get to know this "little paradise" called Langfang is whetted further through the words closing the first chapter of the first section:

To sum up, while looking for the banality of a provincial town, I happened to stumble upon a model, avant-garde town representing the ambitions of contemporary China. Langfang has become, or is becoming, the utopia of modernity. (p. 50)

Nothing less!

The book has three parts entitled respectively "Cities, families, childhood," "Schools, teachers, teaching," and "Single children, creators of culture." The second and third chapter of the first part are devoted to presenting the deconstruction of the family and educational framework that the Chinese population (in Langfang and elsewhere) has been subjected to since the 1970s. It is just a little surprising that when the author touches on the Chinese authorities' efforts to "control population growth and raise its quality" through a very strict family planning policy, she does not consider it necessary to mention the work of Susan Greenhalgh. In a now famous 2005 article, Greenhalgh showed how this plan was initially the sole initiative of Song Jian, an expert not in demography, but in missile launching.¹ This "military" origin of the project nevertheless helps explain a point Chicharro often stresses: the generation of single

children resulted from a “proactive policy to control births and speed up modernisation” (p. 58) and mould a new Chinese citizen. In Chinese families today (labelled “4-2-1 families” for four grandparents, two parents, and one child), children demand so much attention that they have been called “little emperors,” “little princesses,” or even “little suns.” As the author stresses, however, “more than the emergence of the 4-2-1 family structure, the entire network of relationships is undergoing a metamorphosis” (p. 62): the words for brothers and sisters are henceforth used more often for cousins only (p. 69); the notion of patrilineality is questioned (p. 71); only sons are sometimes deemed to lack “manliness” (男子气-*nanziqi*, p. 78); profound changes have taken place in the conceptions of education and handing down of family traditions (p. 85); parents feel incompetent in educating their children to cope with current circumstances (p. 107), retaining only the task of teaching them how to be a “human being” (为人-*weiren*, p. 103) and leaving it to the state to undertake cultural transmission, a situation often deemed by only children as “a veritable abandonment by their parents” (p. 111).

The second part begins with a detailed presentation of Langfang’s Primary School No. 12, which the author visited several times between 2001 and 2005 (pp. 18-23). A guided tour, as it were, once again reveals Chicharro’s talent in speaking of places. The description is sprinkled with observations that come to life through the acuity of her reflections:

The Western piano is now installed in the ground floor [...] in a prominent place. As for the Chinese violin, it is placed right on the top floor of the school, in a quiet room opening out on a terrace overlooking the city [...]: One is revealed at first glance, the other is hidden but it dominates. (p. 123)

School director Lu is depicted as a talented entrepreneur who was able to use active “guanxiology”² to gradually transform his school into a new type of work unit (*danwei*) reviving a sort of “communist collective” (p. 137) with teachers working and living together, adopting a lifestyle “rather resembling the communal life of a clan village.” The mode of functioning in which the individual’s private life “is not actively contested by ideology” but “merely compromised through promiscuity” evokes more the life of clans than of work units (p. 142).

In this new context, perception of teachers’ role has changed profoundly. At once “gardeners” and “engineers of souls,” officially feted in China on Teachers’ Day every June 6, they are seen by families as mainly “educational specialists from whom one takes counsel and in whom one confides in case of problems with children” (p. 159). Between teachers and their pupils’ families there is an exchange of gifts and counter-gifts so complex that the distinction between the two sides is often blurred: many teachers continue to take care of their pupils outside of school, and some are proud to be addressed sometimes as “mother” (p. 161). This role of transmitters of a new path attributed to teachers in China today has the support of the state, which backs a certain model of “idolatry” conveniently using a so-called (highly idealised) traditional Confucian viewpoint. Although some of the youngest teachers sometimes advocate a certain “equality” that might lead to “relations of friendship between teachers and the taught” (p. 174), such opinions are generally regarded with suspicion.

Parents’ constant exhortations to “pay proper attention to what teachers say” stems from their clear perception that schools are places where the state intends to be set free to “mould an individual or collectivity” in line with set aims so as to “produce men useful to the country” (p. 182). In this sense education reforms are specially revealing

instances in this process of producing future citizens, and Chicharro considers at length one that she witnessed (pp. 182-214). After the education ministry launched in June 2001 a circular “concerning the reform of the basic education programme (on an experimental basis),” the Langfang authorities sought to apply these directives from the 2003-2004 school year, turning the city into an “experimentation region” (实验区 - *shíyàn qū*, p. 183). Chicharro thus found herself in a prime spot to observe how a Chinese primary school could concretely pass from “exam-oriented education” (应试教育 - *yìngshì jiàoyù*) to “quality education” (素质教育 - *sùzhì jiàoyù*).

Treated as little emperors in their childhood and then passed through a state education machinery seeking to transform them into economically and scientifically productive citizens rather than into thinking and responsible subjects capable of becoming actors in social transformations, should the single children generation be seen as another one no less “lost” than the previous?³ In the last part of the book, Chicharro seems to answer this question in the negative, offering three perspectives with a positive outlook, holding out hope for China’s youth and pointing to these single children as “creators of culture.”

First, there are all these young people who clearly refuse to follow the dominant model and express themselves gamely (chap. VII) through provocative songs that go so far as to profess suicidal nihilism, or by enthusiastically hailing works critical of the system (such as *Q Reader* by Lin Changzhi, 2004), or in other cases by summarily abandoning studies after initial failure in university entrance exams, thus laughing at a society where some study so hard they end up “stupid” (学傻 - *xuesha*, p. 226). This generation’s ways, swinging between “escape and anger” (p. 242), appear to the authorities as yet another source of “disorder” or “anarchy” (p. 232). Then there are young people in search of “other paths, other masters” (chap. VIII) who turn towards a quest of the religious kind (officially tolerated since freedom of belief was enshrined in China’s 1978 constitution). Last, Chicharro describes cybercafés (chap. IX), frequented almost exclusively by those under 30 (p. 291), as places where a new culture is being invented due to, among others factors, a digital writing that facilitates literary games and graphic creations and even an original reinvention of the writing process, creating a new subject apt to escape the state’s clutches.

To conclude, Chicharro says as her last word on the issue that these young Chinese, mostly born as only children, will not be content with “becoming what is expected of them. In quite a few cases, the creature manages to escape the creator’s will” (p. 296). It is possible to doubt whether contemporary Chinese youth – playing, frequenting temples, or trying to “reinvent writing” on their computers – is really capable of gradually generating a new culture that can transform one of the world’s most subtly controlled societies. But how can one not share Chicharro’s hope of a less heavy burden for tomorrow’s Chinese youth? Her book shows that Chinese society today continues to heavily invest every child with the more or less conscious ideal of one day becoming another “little emperor,” an expectation nurtured since infancy. But this ideal is a burden as well. One might wonder whether this is not because Mao was able to assume this imperial dream with so much talent that he remains – even more than for his “generosity” (p. 208) – one of the “role models” (楷模人物 - *kaimo renwu*) that the Chinese educational system so greatly needs.⁴

NOTES

1. Susan Greenhalgh, "Missile Science, Population Science: The Origins of China's One-Child Policy," *The China Quarterly*, vol. 182, June 2005, pp. 253-276. It was named runner-up for the Gordon White Prize in 2006 for the most original article in contemporary Chinese studies.
 2. The term was coined by Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (*Gifts, Favors and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China*, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 1994).
 3. Michel Bonnin, *Génération perdue. Le mouvement d'envoi des jeunes instruits à la campagne en Chine, 1968-1980* (Lost generation: The campaign to send educated youth to the countryside), Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 2004.
 4. See Pierre Masset, *L'Empereur Mao - Essai sur le Maoïsme* (Emperor Mao - Essay on Maoism), Paris, Lethielleux, 1979.
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