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The little emperors' new toys: A critical inquiry into children and television in China. Bin Zhao. Dordrecht: Springer, 2012. 215pp., (hardcopy), £90.00, ISBN: 978-3-642-32047-7.

This book focuses on children and television viewing, and is based on empirical data collected in China by Bin Zhao as part of her doctoral dissertation in 1989.

In the 1980s, the number of Chinese students who went abroad to study in the field of social sciences and returned to China to do fieldwork was rather small. Apparently, the educational background Zhao gained in the United Kingdom greatly influenced this research since she enthusiastically embraced critical theory and adopted it as the approach for her study. At that time, Zhao's work was exploratory; this book was published more than two decades after the research was finished. The media landscape in China has changed dramatically since then, and it would have been highly appreciated by the reader if the author had explained what had changed over this time and had addressed the relevance the study holds for present-day China.

Zhao's primary goal for this study was to use the critical approach to understanding everyday life experiences in the process of national modernization, which was characterized by fast economic development and increasing Western influence in the 1980s. Her project was designed around the TV set, which was a new medium to Chinese society at the time. Two chapters, Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, presenting and analyzing empirical data Zhao collected in China, are the core section of the book. In Chapter 6, she analyzes parental control and children's media activity. She reports that Chinese parents were concerned about the length of their children's TV viewing and accordingly were prone to exercise strict control over how long their children sat in front of TV sets. In terms of parental control over media content, based on questionnaires and interviews, Zhao discovered that sexuality was a taboo subject; the majority of parents surveyed did not want to talk about this subject with their children and also did not allow their children to view programs which might include "unhealthy" scenes. In order to make sense of these findings, Zhao turned to cultural factors for interpretation, and brought the reader's attention to the revival of ideas of filial piety, the impact of school education on upward social mobility, and socialist puritanism.

The examination of media phenomena in social, cultural and historical

contexts can contribute to our understanding of educational issues. In Chapter 7, Zhao presents a case study on the craze for “transformer” toys among children who had watched an imported animated TV series called *The Transformers*, a product-based program. In this series, the “transformer” toys are often shown being converted from one mode to another, such as from a vehicle mode to a robot mode, or to a robot with pop-up weapons, and then switched back again. Zhao noticed that the series was so effective that this brand became widely known and many children begged their parents to buy the pricey “transformer” toys. This fad caught Zhao’s attention during her fieldwork in China, and she immediately realized that it could be used as an example to illustrate the powerful impact the television industry and international companies were exerting on China, especially on an audience of Chinese children. Zhao insightfully pointed out that concerns about the success of the TV series *The Transformers* and their tie-in toy lines were mainly raised because most of its profits went to international companies. A few decades later, the “transformer” toy fad has died out, many Chinese toy manufacturers have learned to adopt similar marketing strategies and their achievements have received applause. However, few critiques of this kind of market manipulation have been voiced from the perspective of children’s well-being when it comes to Chinese manufacturers and their toys.

Based on the structure of the book, it is clear to the reader that Zhao uses a rigorous research methodology and made considerable effort to illustrate her findings. In a total of seven chapters, Zhao dedicates two chapters, 3 and 4, to illustrating why a critical approach to research is necessary. She points out that the positivist approach leads to an abstracted empiricism and the interpretative alternative is inadequate because it usually does not go beyond the context of family, ignoring the social and historical contexts, which she considers crucial to making sense of the dynamic connections between the individual and society. After discussing the weaknesses of empiricist and interpretative approaches, Zhao argues that a critical perspective which incorporates situational, intertextual, historical and cultural dimensions is a better choice. In accordance with her intention to carry out a holistic critical study, Zhao employed multiple research methods, including questionnaires, interviews, and observations. Research participants included parents, students, media professionals and officials in Beijing and Jiaozuo in Henan province, which is her hometown.

The effort Zhao has dedicated to establishing her research methodology should receive credit, yet the methodology has not, in fact, been well operationalized. Zhao is aware of this and offers an explanation in her book. She reveals that the length of her fieldwork was severely reduced by the political turmoil in the early summer of 1989 in China. Specifically, her fieldwork was carried out from April 21 to May 20, 1989. Furthermore, this one month had to be divided between two cities. Another reason she gives for the unsatisfactory empirical data is that the study was short of funding, which limited her ability to reach the desired standard of sample selection. The empirical data she presents in the book indicates that she used the time available to its fullest potential to administer questionnaires, conduct in-depth interviews and carry out observations. Nevertheless, all of these efforts still cannot offset the damaging consequences of rushed fieldwork, and the situation is made worse by the use of multiple research methods, which definitely require more time than if a single method had been used.

In summary, this book is based on a very ambitious research plan which was compromised at the time of completion, resulting in findings that are somewhat tentative and exploratory. The relevance of these findings to the current situation may also be questionable, due to the long passage of time and the weakness of the empirical data.

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Research on educational leadership over the past two decades has consistently