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## BOOK REVIEW

### *Fragile Elite: The Dilemmas of China's Top University Students*

Susanne Bregnbæk

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Julian Mohr

University of Vienna, Austria

moju0729@gmail.com

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At the centre of the investigation Bregnbæk undertakes in her compelling monograph "Fragile Elite" stands the question of the identity of Chinese elite students at the two universities of Tsinghua and Beijing University. Drawing on the data from two phases of field work, conducted in 2005 and 2007, in which she entered into dialogue with not only students, but also teachers and parents, she examines how these elite students experience being one in a million who have made it to the top of the education system.

Referring to the so-called Oedipal Project as the natural need of children to withdraw more and more from the influence of their parents in the context of growing up, Bregnbæk presents the social dilemma of double binds (15) in the context of the still socially, but also politically persistent relevance of traditional concepts like Confucian filial piety. For example, young Chinese find themselves confronted with the tension between the need for self-realisation and the fulfilment of the generational contract of the sacrifices made by their parents. She also succeeds in highlighting the fact that these double-bind tensions can be identified due to structural parallels between the political system and the family system in the overall social context. The Communist Party presents itself as a parental figure whose expectations are also projected on to today's youth, who identify their own social role as children of the state (79).

The all-encompassing framework of her research builds on suicides among elite students, whose motives form both the introduction (1) and the conclusion (139) of her investigation. Within this framework, Chapters 1 and 2 deal mainly with Confucian filial piety and its role in the relationship of students to parents, as well as to the state. Using *inter alia* the example of the student JingJing, Bregnbæk highlights the influence of Confucian filial piety on the identification process of young people in modern society in the People's Republic of China (27). Furthermore, it is shown that the tensions between self-realisation and self-sacrifice triggered by the Oedipal Project do not so much lead to an active counteraction against parental ideas by the children, but are rather resolved, for example, by the secret second lives of the students (59).

The central subject of the following chapters 3 and 4 is primarily the role of the Communist Party in the self-location process of the young elite and what role party membership plays in that process. Bregnbæk focuses not only on students, but also on teachers as representatives of the political system (66). It is evident that the parental

role of the party (71) appears to be effective in the overall social context and thus the appeal to the Confucian filial piety of its citizens appears to be effective overall. However, this is also accompanied by the already mentioned tensions caused by the Oedipal Project in the smaller family context, now transferred to the overall social level (74). Furthermore, although she identifies love for the Party to be a possible reason for entry in the case of certain interlocutors (83), it is nevertheless clear that the intended membership of an increasing number of students can rather be identified from the pragmatic point of view as the means to an end. Here, it is not so much a political persuasion as the desire for the social mobility that goes hand in hand with membership that is at the centre of the decision (89). In this case, she notes from conversations with students over an extended period of time that even those students who had previously joined the party out of political persuasion experienced gradual disillusionment in the face of spreading corruption within the party (96).

Chapter 5 then discusses the role of the Chinese education system as well as that of childcare in the context of the one-child policy. The central motif here is the concept of *suzhi jiaoyu* 素质教育 (education for quality) along with that of the spoiled little empresses and emperors. Bregnbæk emphasises the direct connection between the one-child policy and the ongoing discourse about the little emperors (99). Furthermore, she presents the so-called *suzhi jiaoyu* as a contradictory and above all unsuccessful concept. While *suzhi jiaoyu* was originally adopted to educate "innovative citizens" and relieve students of pressure, its reality appears to be a test- and party-centered competitive system whose extracurricular courses further increase the pressure on students (105).

In Chapter 6, Bregnbæk concludes by returning to the subject of suicides among students. Here, the psychological problems of affected students are examined in the context of the double bind and again *suzhi jiaoyu*. Not only is the handling and perception of the topic of suicides within different parties such as the students, universities, or the parents illuminated (123-125), she also takes a closer look at the possibility of an interpretation of suicide as a social critique (134). Taking into account the traditional use of suicide as a means of referring to social injustice in the public sphere, she finally comes to the conclusion that it is impossible to give precise answers to the questions

about the reasons for committing suicide in the context of this work. She finds clear words, however, in her conclusion on the tabooing of this topic by the official authorities. In Bregnbæk's view, the suicide of the educational elite and an active discourse in public space would, for example, have the potential to question the logic of the system of self-sacrifice and fulfilment of the generational contract, both in the family and in society as a whole (136-137).

In my opinion, the most significant point of criticism lies in the transparency of the methodology applied by Bregnbæk. She does not go into detail about exactly what criteria she used to select her interlocutors, nor how exactly she accessed them. For example, she only mentions within one subordinate clause that she looked for interlocutors by using an advertisement on the university intranet (47). Instead, it would have been interesting, for example in the context of the introduction, to know what problems she encountered during her data collection within her field research, especially in the light of her quite provocative research topic. Moreover, it is not possible clearly to identify exactly how her interview approach was designed. An explanation of how the dialogues were structured and guided would have been just as interesting as, for example, the selection and type of questions asked.

Apart from that, I consider Bregnbæk's work to be a valuable and important contribution to the current topic of the identification processes of young Chinese in today's People's Republic. She succeeds in explaining to the reader in a logical and understandable way the complex identification processes and the associated problems to which young Chinese people are exposed against the background of overall social as well as individual family situations. Even though the question of identity is not new, Bregnbæk's work is particularly outstanding for its interdisciplinary approach to her subject. Thus, her analysis includes Mencius (11) or the 24 Paragons of Filial Piety (36), as well as Arendt (27), Freud (38), or Laing (132). It should also be emphasised that she is always aware of the problems of transcultural applicability of Western theories to her subject (38), as well as of her participatory role in the research process (98).