

Transitions: Journal of Transient Migration
Volume 1 Number 1

© 2017 Intellect Ltd Reviews. English language. doi: 10.1386/tjtm.1.1.137_5

REVIEWS

TRANSNATIONAL STUDENTS AND MOBILITY: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MIGRATION, HANNAH SOONG (2016)

New York and London: Routledge, 204 pp.,
ISBN: 9781138022836, h/bk, £90

Peidong Yang, Nanyang Technological University

Hannah Soong's book *Transnational Students and Mobility* (part of the Routledge Advances in Sociology series) is one of the newest additions to a fast-growing interdisciplinary scholarship on international student migrants in higher education. In perhaps the most comprehensive review and synthesis of literature on student mobility and higher education internationalization to date, Brooks and Waters insightfully observe that:

[R]esearch on student mobilities tends to be divided into work on large scale student flows and corresponding international, national, regional and institutional policy on the one hand, and in-depth, qualitative empirical research focusing on the experiences of individual students on the other.

(Brooks and Waters 2011: 48)

Soong's work belongs decisively to the second category. In fact, *Transnational Students and Mobility* could be said to have taken the in-depth qualitative approach to the fullest extent possible, as the empirical data in the book are based on the author's engagements with just seven research participants. Hailing from Israel, Sri Lanka, China and India, these seven research participants, aged in their twenties and thirties, were pursuing postgraduate degrees in teacher education in Australia, with a view to joining the teaching profession there and possibly settling down. What seems to be a small number of research participants is perhaps more than compensated for in terms of the depth of the author's engagement with them. According to Soong, she carried

out repeated interviews and ongoing informal interactions with these seven trainee teacher-cum-migrants between 2008 and 2011. The book's appendices give detailed accounts of the author's research activities as well as the research participants' biographic information, in addition to the copious quotes and ethnographic notes found in the various chapters of the book. Thus, one main strength of Soong's book lies in its rich ethnographic and narrative detail concerning the student migrants' lived experiences, which also makes the volume's various empirical parts enjoyable to read.

The book acknowledges and builds upon Shanthi Robertson's (2013) conceptualization of the 'education-migration nexus', namely the intertwining of the educational project and the (im)migratory project at both the nation state policy level and individuals' personal strategies and experiences – a phenomenon that is observed across many developed countries, but particularly so in Australia in the first decade of the 2000s. Soong's work is differentiated from Robertson's in that the former is preoccupied with the subjective experiences of being a student migrant, with a focus on what Soong calls the 'transnational mode of consciousness'. In other words, Soong's book is very much concerned with the question of the 'state of mind' of transnational student migrant subjects, and she uses phrases such as 'fitting in', 'looking out' and 'being in flux' to describe the tensions and sometimes conflicted dynamics that characterized the subjective realms of her research participants. While 'fitting in' is typically a pragmatic response to exigencies of migration, and 'looking out' a desire for mobility driven by imaginations and fantasies of the beyond, Soong argues that 'being in flux' is the 'most significant theme of this book' (p. 17) because this perpetual state of contingency, uncertainty, yet also possibility, lies at the heart of the situation of transnational student migrants.

One interesting feature of the book that readers will hardly fail to notice is the author's ambitious engagement with philosophy (especially hermeneutic phenomenology) in interpreting her data. As Soong acknowledges: 'This book began as a study of the adjustment experiences of a group of international teacher education students which ended up as a hermeneutic phenomenological reading of the education-migration nexus on self-redefinition issues of seven student-migrants' (p. 163). In fact, the book's impressive bibliography includes weighty names such as Heidegger, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. This level of theoretical ambitiousness is rare in research on international students so far, and perhaps even in educational research in general; as such, the book provides an interesting experimental case as to how high theory might be applied to this particular field of empirical social research.

Apart from philosophy, Soong's book also makes extensive cross-disciplinary references to a vast body of literature on transnationalism, migration, postcolonialism, social imagination/imaginary, identity, and so forth, as exemplified in the book's dense introductory chapter. While this is certainly a laudable effort, one possible drawback is that a sense of the author's distinct contribution to the field – be it theoretical or empirical – gets somewhat blunted in this meandering trip of theoretical gymnastics.

REFERENCES

- Brooks, R. and Waters, J. (2011), *Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalization of Higher Education*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Robertson, S. (2013), *Transnational Student-Migrants and the State: The Education-Migration Nexus*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.