



Desiring TESOL and international education

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BOOK REVIEW

Desiring TESOL and international education, by Raqib Chowdhury and Phan Le-Ha, London, Multilingual Matters, 2014, 288 pp., £29.95 (paperback) ISBN 978-1-783-09147-8

Transnational education crossing 'Asia' and 'the West', by Phan Le-Ha, New York, Routledge, 2017, 260 pp., £36.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-138-60460-5

Reviewed by Lee-Tat Chow and Peidong Yang

Desire, inter/transnational education, and the 'Asia'-'West' dichotomy

In recent years, scholarship on inter/transnational education and educational mobility has witnessed a rising interest in the notion of 'desire' (e.g. Collins, Sidhu, Lewis, & Yeoh, 2014; Fong, 2011; Suhanthie & Angel, 2014; Takahashi, 2013; Yang, 2016). It is not difficult to see why: desire in general (as well as its cognate concepts such as 'aspiration') has been pointed out as one of the key drivers compelling people to move, in pursuit of various objectives, including education (Carling & Collins, 2018). Indeed, projects of international education, whether involving physical mobility or not, are often premised fundamentally upon the (perceived) desirability of forms of education associated with specific institutions, countries, cultures, or geographical spaces that lie beyond local/domestic provisions (Beech, 2014). However, what exactly constitutes this elusive notion of desire (and specifically *educational desire*)? How does desire come about? And how does it operate? Although the concept of desire is known for its association with abstract theories, in the context of the sociology and anthropology of education, the question of desire is perhaps best answered through empirical inquiries.

Desiring TESOL and International Education (Chowdhury & Phan, 2014) and *Transnational Education Crossing 'Asia' and 'the West'* (Phan, 2017) are two important works that mark significant advances in scholarly understandings of desire within the context of international education (henceforth also including its correlate, transnational education). Grounded in rich empirical research, both accounts show how particular constructions of desire and desiring subjects, framed within an 'East' (or 'Asia')-'West' dichotomy, are indispensable for sustaining contemporary trends and developments in international education. Specifically, both works explore how understandings of international education, and the image(s) of the international student, are constructed and perpetuated through discourses; as well as the experiences of international students as they adopt, resist or appropriate these discourses. *Desiring TESOL* primarily explores these issues in the Australian context of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) education, whereas *Transnational Education* addresses a similar set of questions through the case of transnational education (TNE) programmes emerging recently in Asia. We look at each work in turn.

In *Desiring TESOL*, where the authors examine the perceptions and relationships international students have towards international education, the theme of *desire*

emerges as a crucial factor in the processes of the discursive constructions of subjectivities. The authors argue that desire is something that goes beyond the arbitrary ‘personal preferences’ of individuals, but is ‘shaped by sites of influence, such as social, economic and educational settings’ (p. 124). The generation of desires is traced through a process of *interpellation* (cf Althusser, 2014), where subjects are invited by a discourse to partake in a self-image or identity of the latter’s construction, and subsequently positioned within the discourse (p. 42). *Desiring TESOL* unpacks these processes using two theoretical frameworks: Foucauldian archeology, which focuses on how discursive practices – word, statements, propositions – are utilized, endorsed, rejected or appropriated, in conceiving international education and international students (pp. 34–35); and Foucauldian genealogy, which explores how the subjectivity of the international student is ‘manufactured’, ‘internalized’ and construed as a ‘truth about oneself’ in relation to discourses (p. 96). The data utilized by Chowdhury and Phan’s study centers on the narratives of international students enrolled in TESOL programmes in Australia, as well as the discursive practices manifested especially in policies and marketing collaterals.

As the subtitle of the book – *market abuse and exploitation* – indicates, a key focus in *Desiring TESOL* is the hegemony of market discourses within conceptions of international education which shape student desires. The market discourse puts international education and students in a product-consumer relationship, where students are presented with product-services under a rubric of individual ‘free’ choice, while simultaneously being presented with ‘very strong pointers’ that frame their decisions (p. 124). The marketization of international education is taken up particularly in Chapter 5, which chronologically traces the evolution of international education policy in Australia where, with international education conceived explicitly as a revenue-generating export industry, the quality of programmes and their social relevance/impact are obscured by the apparent success gauged through consumer choice principles (p. 61). Consequently, the marketing of international education to prospective students takes on the form of a tourist discourse, reducing nations and nationalities into ‘essences and cultural symbols’ (p. 119).

The essentialization underpinning market discourses is further surfaced by Chowdhury and Phan (especially in Chapter 4) in the constructed stereotypes of Asian students as ‘passive, uncritical, quiet and obedient’, and Western/Australian students as ‘active and critical’, within international education (p. 83). It is argued that this stereotype uncritically attributes privilege to Western academic discursive practices as an unexamined norm, whilst conceiving non-Western approaches with a deficit view. This hierarchical dichotomy is gleamed from student narratives, especially through the elevated status ascribed to the English language, which characterised the desires of students to pursue international education. For instance, one student equated English with ‘sophistication’ (p. 173). Other students maintained that an American/Canadian accent was desirable in job interviews (p. 141), and in a similar vein, viewed American accents (p. 177) or being ‘westernized’ (p. 194) as something that is ‘cool’. The desire to interact with Westerners as part of the international experience while discounting other non-Western demographics also features the privileged construction that ‘the West’ is afforded (p. 147). These issues are taken up and explored further in a different context in Phan (2017) more recent book *Transnational Education Crossing ‘Asia’ and ‘the West’*.

Transnational Education documents how, exploiting the cache of ‘Western’ education, university recruiters in Asia seek to bolster their institutional image and attract international student enrolment by adopting English as the medium of instruction (EMI) as well as curriculums modeled on those from the ‘West’. On the one hand,

such a strategy has emerged as a pragmatic reaction to market pressures in an increasingly global competition for international students, as Phan illustrates through the examples of EMI programmes in UAE, Vietnam and Japan (chapter 5). On the other hand, English-medium TNE programmes in Asia also rest upon as well as perpetuate certain ideological constructions of the superiority of the 'West' over the 'Asian', and hence the desirability of the former. The relationship between Asia and the West, as Phan brilliantly conceives, is paradoxical, in that each simultaneously attempts to draw the other closer to benefit the business of internationalization, while at the same time maintaining a distance by essentializing the Other. In this dichotomous set-up, the 'West' is characterized as "validated quality, prestige, reputation, English language...", 'cosmopolitan', 'global', 'progressive', and 'sophisticated', whereas the 'East' is Orientalized (cf Said, 1978) in terms of 'authenticity of food, traditions, and cultures' (p. 61). The elevation of Western education is perhaps at its most apparent when Asia is marketed as a point of transit, rather than a destination in itself, that would help international students eventually migrate to the promised land represented by the West (p. 76).

Echoing *Desiring TESOL*, *Transnational Education* also contains numerous ethnographic accounts of the ways in which Asian students are beholden to desires for educational experiences deemed 'Western'. For instance, among international students enrolled in TNE programmes in Vietnam, their desire for the English language resulted in the invalidation of other non-English languages as part of their 'international' education experience (p. 101). A similar phenomenon was observed when students expressed their disappointment in the absence of 'Westerners' among the student and faculty bodies, as part of the expected experience, effectively invalidating their interactions with other 'Asian' students and cultures (Chapter 8). Another consequence was a projected superiority of the West and Westerners. Phan observed that the desire for the 'West' among a group of Chinese international students resulted in an interesting rationalization process when their learning objectives were not met by an Australian (Caucasian) male teacher, imagined by the students here as 'Western'. These students attributed their failed educational experience to their 'Asian cultural and educational traits', which were perceived to be insufficient in light of an idealized, more 'critical' and 'Western'-style of teaching. As Phan argues, race and ethnicity played an important role in the idealization of 'the West', where in this instance, students 'found reasons to qualify him [the Australian Caucasian lecturer] such that his image resumes to fit their fantasy of Western [Caucasian] native English-speaking teachers' (p. 162).

Such uncritical – even unscrupulous – adoption of English, as Phan discusses in Chapter 7, places EMI programmes in an awkward position in the Vietnamese society. While EMI programmes are supposedly 'elite' and desirable, locally, they end up becoming negatively associated with 'low quality in terms of teaching and learning, low-quality students, non-accreditation, mediocrity in every way, money and profit orientation, and easy entry and easy exit in every aspect...' (p. 135). Despite the intended desirability and positive outcomes associated with EMI programmes, the reality is that such programmes tend to gather faculty and students who are inadequately prepared to teach or learn complex university-level content in an unfamiliar language, resulting in all involved parties having to accept programme quality that is evidently 'mediocre'.

In short, both books vividly illustrate how international students, as consumers of highly commodified inter-/transnational education, are constituted as subjects of specific desires through hierarchical and essentializing discourses set within an

'East'-'West' framework. Both books also pointedly reveal how being captivated by such desires can make international students and teaching faculty vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and indeed, a neo-colonialism of sorts; the market demand for 'international education', underpinned by an implicit prioritization of an essentialized Occidental 'West' over an Oriental 'East', inhibits the diversity and quality of education programs through an increasingly monolingual (English) academic environment. However, while powerfully exposing these problematic issues, both works must be applauded for not simply writing off the agency of the international students, but instead acknowledging the generative or creative potentials that go hand-in-hand with desire. The relationship between discourse and subjectivity is shown to be anything but deterministic; instead, it involves agency, negotiation, and transformative potentials.

As Chowdhury and Phan (2014) maintain in *Desiring TESOL*, when subjects are interpellated into discourses, their desires – in some instances – in fact 'create fault lines' as they resist or appropriate the discourse for their benefit, creating 'spaces of agency and autonomy when power is pushed aside and knowledge is changed or reconstructed in subtle ways' (p. 40). Chapter 9 illustrates this by showing how, despite being disappointed by the lived experiences of international education, international students nevertheless use their unsatisfactory 'purchases' to pave alternative pathways to success. For example, one student whose career progression as an English teacher was jeopardized through university mismanagement (p. 212), turned this negative experience around when she appropriated her TESOL qualification as an indirect credit to her work in another profession. Similarly, while another student complained about the limited variety and depth of content in TESOL, he nevertheless acknowledged the (perceived) advantage that his TESOL qualification has within the job market (pp. 216–217).

With copious interview data, Chowdhury and Phan also show that, despite the prevailing desire for the West and for English deeply grounded in hegemonic discourses about East-West dichotomy, students nevertheless demonstrated capacities for critical reflexivity. Some students maintained more nuanced positions, resisting the notion of Western culture as 'silencing' (p. 51) or oppressive towards their Asian identities. For instance, one student viewed the conflict between her Western and Asian identities in a positive light, as testimony to her adaptability towards different cultures (p. 168), while another treated her Western education as a catalyst that rekindled a newfound understanding and appreciation for her own culture (p. 171). Clearly, as intimated in Chapter 8 which is devoted to the exploration of a single student's narrative as a site of multiple viewpoints, the hierarchical dynamics between the 'West' and 'Asia' are neither ubiquitous nor uniform, and continue to be subject to constant tensions and negotiations.

Phan offers similar observations in *Transnational Education*. Despite having to live with educational 'mediocrity', the students in Phan studied are found to display ingenious abilities to derive positive outcomes from their mediocre experiences. Pragmatically, the relatively easy demands in time, resources and academic rigor required in mediocre programmes allow students to imagine themselves in elite educational settings – marked by English medium instruction and a 'Western' curriculum – that are otherwise beyond their reach; this in turn unleashes for these students what might be called a 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai, 2004) despite their limited resources.

Furthermore, as Phan (2017) shows in Chapter 10 of the book, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds – coming from semi-urban or rural countryside

areas in Asia – draw empowerment from their mediocre international education experiences, which lead to various ‘unexpected trajectories’ (p. 189) and possibilities. The cases explored in this chapter most notably highlight how the desire for English acts as a catalyst for such unexpected transformations. In some cases, English proved to be an important tool in securing social mobility for the students. Other students resisted the trends of learning English as an economic or social tool, but appropriated it at a more intimate level that ‘carries feelings, love, and affection’ in constructing unique identities for themselves (p. 194). Additionally, despite the ‘colonizing influence’ often attributed to English – a sentiment that propels much of the discussions in *Desiring TESOL* and *Transnational Education* as well – some students utilize English as a means to reassert and renew their appreciation for their own ‘Asian’ identities, or as a means to connect with other non-native English speaking cultures. Phan refers to such multifarious ways in which an otherwise ‘mediocre’ educational experience can lead to unexpected possibilities and deep subjective transformations for students, as ‘transformative mediocrity’. Put differently, those very desires that make these marginalized students vulnerable to exploitation can also be the source for new narratives, imaginaries, and pathways in which students derive a sense of empowerment and agency.

In sum, the desires that chart student pathways in international education are as diverse and multifarious as the influences that shape these desires; this complexity is further intensified in the multiple ways that students adopt, resist and/or appropriate the conditions surrounding their experiences. Such narrative thickness and nuances that line students’ experiences are often buried away under the abstractions and figurations of policy research. As the authors themselves disclaim in *Desiring TESOL* – a sentiment which we believe applies equally to *Transnational Education* – far from providing a generalized account of international education, these studies resist the perpetuation of ‘sweeping generalizations’ characteristic of ‘large surveys and other “scientific” studies’ (p. 239). Indeed, and quite conversely, the sociological and anthropological contributions made by these two books excavate illuminating accounts of student experiences in international education, breaking the generalizations found in our common practices as well as research sensibilities. Whether an academic seeking a serious piece of sociological or anthropological work, an education policy maker, a professional in the education industry or a student in the process of embarking on an educational journey, readers will find *Desiring TESOL* and *Transnational Education* to be relevant and enriching in one way or another; certainly, worth the time to pick up and reflect through.

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