



International mobility and educational desire: Chinese foreign talent students in Singapore. By Peidong Yang. Pp. 135. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2016. £37.99 (hardback). ISBN 9781137591425

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Review

International mobility and educational desire: Chinese foreign talent students in Singapore. By Peidong Yang. Pp. 135. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2016. £37.99 (hardback). ISBN 9781137591425

Singapore's rapid rise in global capitalism has translated its economic success into massive improvements in material living. Within a brief two decades, Singapore has transformed its labour-intensive industries into knowledge intensive and capital intensive industrialisation, attracting foreign investments as well as highly selective migrants to flow into the country to live, study and work there. Not only has Singapore's success become part of its national pride and identity, this success has captured the social imaginaries of many and provided a sense of a 'desired future' to both Singaporeans and foreigners (Wee, 2004). *International Mobility and Educational Desire* sheds light on how Singapore embodies a type of national ideology which is premised on meritocracy and grit. Yet, such pillars of the 'Singapore Dream' also conveniently ignore the criss-cross contradictions of a society marked by the absence of a sense of belonging in many areas of social life, which can be best explained from the narratives unfolded in this book.

International Mobility and Educational Desire highlights a largely invisible group of foreign Chinese scholars in Singapore – the recruiting of talented students from China, and the multiple conflicts of belongings and aspirations these scholars embody as 'desired' subjects of the nation state. Yang Peidong places foreign Chinese scholars in the global context, opening a new line of research on the phenomenon of *educational desire*, and compelling us to consider what it means to be internationally mobile Chinese foreign scholars.

This book is a timely contribution to an important field. It acts as a springboard to spur more conversations, but it also invites readers to join Yang on a shared journey of becoming acquainted with the Chinese foreign scholars. A central feature of this book is the manner in which it weaves anthropological and cultural theory as a lens to interpret the experiences of the Chinese foreign scholars. Building on various theoretical perspectives on the meaning of *educational desire*, this book facilitates a captivating study of the arbitrary 'pragmatist and instrumentalist logic of *education desire*' (p. 48), lived in the experiences of these students as they navigate their everyday lives and renegotiate their identities as 'appropriated talent in Singapore' (p. 22). It argues that although '*education desires* and sociocultural identities are ongoing personal projects for international students' (p. 23), the ethnographical perspective on '*education desire*' lies in the heart of what can be and cannot be materialised, as well as how such *desire* is intensified in and through the experiences, specifically from the ethnographical accounts of the Chinese student participants.

Chapter 1 serves as the introduction to the book and provides insight into the organisation of sections and chapters. Chapter 2 discusses the contexts of Singapore's foreign talent programs and the recruitment of the Chinese middle school students within a specific province and school. Both these chapters set the scene for comprehending Singapore's foreign talent policy since the 1990s and how Chinese students are shaped

as subjects of *education desire* by two concurrent logics: ‘one involving the ideologised normalisation emphasising virtues and values, and the other being a pragmatic attitude stressing extrinsic utilities and instrumental outcomes’ (p. 33). Echoing what Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou write in *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* (2015), these Chinese foreign scholars indeed dispelled the seductive argument that there is something essential about Asian culture that drives exceptional academic outcomes. In a series of chapters, different but related implications are explored as each represents a specific dimension of the educational sojourn and mobility that the Chinese foreign talents experience in Singapore: selection process; cross-cultural encounters and Singlish; othering and being ‘Very China’; and the range of educational desire spectrum.

Chapter 3 provides a first-hand ethnographic detailed look at how Singapore recruits foreign talent students of the (15th batch) ‘Senior Middle school (SM2)’ program, in the southern Chinese province of Jiangxi. It also offers rare insights on how this Singapore scholarship scheme is perceived by the Chinese candidates themselves. As Yang discovers, the educational choices of the Chinese students are very much influenced by their parents, thereby, illustrating that there is a tendency to have hopeful imaginations about what Singapore can deliver for the Chinese candidates. Still, despite the positive reputation of Singapore having a well-developed political and education system, the Chinese candidates are faced with the dilemma of the transactional dimension of the scholarship. One particular compliance requirement for successful Chinese candidates, which can be potentially stressful to some, is the strict adherence to undertake degrees only in science and maths disciplines. Adding to this dilemma, the scholars are also charged with the expectations of their parents that their academic achievements will correlate with their socio-economic success. This further complicates the position of Chinese foreign talents when their educational desires remain to be contingent as they navigate conflicted experiences of ‘fulfilment, frustration and failure’ (p. 23) in various aspects of their experiences which are elegantly unfolded in the remaining chapters of the book (Chapters 4–6).

Chapter 4 examines the cross-cultural experiences of the Chinese scholars on a Singapore university campus with a specific focus on their ways of negotiating with ‘Singlish’, and how the figure of the Singaporean student is perceived. This chapter first offers a unique perspective on how Singlish, the creolised informal local lingua franca, can be a symbolic cultural and linguistic boundary experienced by the Chinese foreign talent students when it comes to cross-cultural communication and engagement in the university campus. Because the Chinese respondents that Yang has interviewed have had problems with partaking in Singlish banter, it thus arguably becomes a vehicle for cultural stereotyping about their Singaporean peers on campus. Despite the differences in respective educational and cultural backgrounds and subjectivities, the chapter later explains a paradox. That, amidst the rather limited contacts between the host and Chinese students, by marking the Singaporean student as the ‘other’ figure, the Chinese subjects have perpetuated the cycle of stereotyping, thus preventing meaningful connection between local and Chinese students.

Again set in the university context, Chapter 5 ethnographically extends the psycho-social experience of the Chinese scholars gaining self-consciousness and identity change around the notion of ‘very China’-ness. This chapter – a major strength of this book – puts more emphasis on the generativity of *educational desire*. Having encountered and experienced being the ‘other’, the Chinese scholars experience what is their being ‘very-China’-ness. Such a form of realisation is shaped by their desire to overcome difference when they are confronted by embarrassing and difficult encounters for being scholarly in manner, thought and speech. As an identity category, Yang explores how the complex

notion of ‘very China’-ness actually signifies a particular set of attitudes pertaining to education. The tensions experienced in the process of educational sojourn involves the Chinese subjects replacing what were thought to be less desirable selves with what they perceived to be more balanced ones. Thus, as Yang argues, ‘as the *desire* underpinning identity politics moves on, so do the foci of identity politics ... When this [*desire*] has been satisfied and negated through their self- (trans)formation ... the “very China” drama as a psychosocial process meets its closure’ (p. 111).

The final chapter, Chapter 6, provides in detail the Chinese scholars’ complex and sometimes self-conflicting attitudes surrounding the purpose of the undergraduate education at the Singapore University. Here, we understand why the Chinese scholars exhibit certain idealistic education desires which are often mismatched, and how undertaking Singapore tertiary education reshapes their educational subjectivities. This chapter moots the point that international students who are foreign talents have an even bigger challenge than their fellow international student counterparts because they are plunged into deeper conflicted experience of desires and self-identity change.

When taken as a whole, *International Mobility and Educational Desire* introduces and presents a fascinating look at how *educational desires* and sociocultural identities of the Chinese respondents are ongoing personal projects. It provides us an insight into the challenges faced by the Chinese foreign scholars who juggle distinct identities of being international students, desired foreign talents and ‘very China’. In doing so, this book offers an argument that is consistent with scholars and practitioners working within the subject matter of educational mobility. For this reason, one can imagine the range of readers for whom this book is written. The book is aimed at educational policy-makers who have the power to make a positive impact on the lives of the foreign scholars and international students alike, but are currently hesitant to do so. Perhaps, this may be because they lack an understanding of possibilities for meaningful engagement to occur. It is possible that Yang’s intended readers are his university colleagues, teaching both international and domestic students in their classes, who might also be struggling to respond to the needs of Chinese international students due to the controlled climate in which they find themselves. Last but not least, Yang’s readers could be ordinary migrants, citizens and students of various sectors who recognise the central role education plays in cultivation of transnational mobility, and who are keen to develop their own capacities in order to contribute to society as valuable members. *Educational desire*, as this book surmises, is a complex experience and should be explored much more vigorously and intimately than it has ever been done before.

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