

[Home](#) > Review of *International Mobility and Educational Desire: Chinese Foreign Talent Students in Singapore*. Peidong Yang. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 136 pp.

REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY AND EDUCATIONAL DESIRE: CHINESE FOREIGN TALENT STUDENTS IN SINGAPORE. PEIDONG YANG. PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2016, 136 PP.

Qiyang Zhang†
Johns Hopkins University, School of Education

Soumya Mittal†
University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education & School of Social Policy & Practice

† authors contributed equally to this review

Abstract:

Since the 1990s, Singapore has been recruiting students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to study in Singapore's education system as a part of its foreign-talent recruitment strategy. Through ethnographic fieldwork in two urban cities in the PRC and Singapore, *International Mobility and Educational Desire* records and analyzes PRC students' experiences of marginalization, identity transformations, and struggles in a different education system. The cultural dissonance in a diverse classroom leads to feelings of social exclusion. This highlights the lack of institutional resources in urban classrooms and calls for more attention to marginalized students' psychological well-being.

Similar to many other developed countries, Singapore has struggled with a below-replacement fertility rate, aging population, and brain drain of local talents over the past decades. This scarcity of human capital has motivated Singapore to recruit human capital from developing countries in Asia through immigration-friendly policies. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is one of the main target countries for Singapore's talent recruitment efforts. Since the beginning of economic reform in 1978 in the PRC, there has also been a drastic increase in the number of PRC students pursuing high-quality education abroad. Since the 1990s, the PRC's supply of students has met Singapore's demand for human capital through a bilateral foreign-talent strategy, where Singapore would grant PRC students scholarships to study in Singapore's educational system.

In *International Mobility and Educational Desire*, the author, Peidong Yang, provides the first ethnographic record of these China–Singapore foreign-talent programs, which have been operating for nearly three decades now. As one of the recruited PRC students, Yang joined these foreign-talent programs to study at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. These programs are not publicized in the PRC and thus, there is virtually no accessible official data about them. By describing PRC students' cross-cultural encounters and adaptations, Yang offers an original perspective on urban education in this globalized era. The book analyzes PRC students' struggles with identity conflict, disillusionment with educational desire, and subsequent development of entrepreneurialism during their overseas studies in Singapore. As Yang argues, this disillusionment arises because students migrate to pursue intellectual discoveries; however, by contrast, university education in Singapore focuses more on the instrumental value of education, such as securing a job. The difference in focus within Singapore's higher education molds students' career choices towards a more professional path.

Yang's two-site ethnography offers a unique comparison within the field of urban education by focusing on the urban contexts of Nanchang (the author's hometown) and Singapore (the program's location). In this research design, the author records both the initial student recruitment procedure in Nanchang as well as the campus experience and professional development of recruited PRC students in Singapore. In Nanchang, Yang conducted individual interviews, focus group interviews, and qualitative questionnaires with high school students. This methodology captures a holistic account of the students' educational experiences in China, opinions about the bilateral scholarship program, and the scholarship selection procedure. In Singapore, Yang documented first-hand interviews with 49 PRC students attending higher education institutions. These accounts recorded students' experiences and acclimatization to a different culture and a new educational system.

Yang's book features international student migration and sheds light on these students' psychological transformations regarding their identities and educational desires. The book's main argument and analysis unfolds in three sections, building from PRC

students' experiences of marginalization, to their gradual identity transformations, and converging on educational pursuits. By focusing on the miscommunications caused by language barriers and cultural differences, the book's first section reveals the social marginalization faced by PRC students, psychological confusion over their identities, and mindset transformation while adapting to Singapore's local environment. Under the foreign-talent scholarship programs, PRC students migrate to Singapore during their adolescent years when their identity formation is still vulnerable and malleable. During this formative period, the young students experience feelings of exclusion and discrimination, which has a lasting effect on their identities. In one of the interviews, a PRC female student recalls "sitting in the common room with a group of Singaporeans in an orientation event. They just kept speaking among themselves loudly and very fast in Singlish (colloquial Singaporean English)." She highlights feeling excluded when she does not "understand them... gradually they no longer engaged with her, and it gave her a kind of 'oppressive' feeling" (p. 81). The unsuccessful attempts to integrate into the local culture are hurtful and this psychological injury gives rise to defense mechanisms. The young PRC students start dismissing Singaporean peers as "not having enough cultivation... intellectually we are not at the same level... you can't have deep interaction with them" (p. 90–91).

In the second section, Yang expands on the theme of "very China," a transient identity label, which encapsulates the inception of PRC students' self-consciousness and critical reflection. In an interview with a PRC student, the student defines "very China" as an ideology that represents "worldviews and philosophies of life" being deeply influenced by the PRC education system (p. 109). The degree of being "very China" is differentiated based on the age of PRC students upon their entry into Singapore's education system. The students who come to Singapore for K–12 education think that the students who come directly for tertiary education are "relatively rigid in their mind and are too fixated on exam results... they don't seem to socialize very much" (p. 109). In contrast to Singapore, where university education aims to equip students with leadership abilities and socialization skills, higher education in the PRC emphasizes the importance of subject knowledge and exam performance. Thus, after living in Singapore for a while, the students recruited in high school perceive the newly recruited university students as having strong PRC characteristics and values.

Reflecting this conflict, the book concludes with discussion of students' educational desires in the third section. Yang describes the PRC students' discontent in terms of an absence of intellectual passion in Singaporean universities. One of the interviewees conveys their frustration by asking, "isn't university supposed to be a place where there are heated debates, which ignite sparks of thoughts?" (p. 118). Yang argues that the mismatch between PRC students' educational desire for pure pleasure of theoretical knowledge and Singapore's pragmatic culture gives rise to the development of anti-scholarly entrepreneurialism. The book shows that the PRC students who adopt this mindset of anti-scholarly entrepreneurialism tend to settle down in Singapore society, while others who struggle with this disillusionment tend to pursue education elsewhere to fulfill their educational desires.

Yang's unique two-site ethnographic fieldwork provides an invaluable contribution to the growing body of scholarship that explores student migration between urban locales. The ethnographic accounts of the students in this cross-cultural context of the PRC and Singapore add to the regional diversity of the present research in the field of international student migration. Through exploration of the PRC students' lived experiences, Yang has taken a pioneering step towards fostering mutual understanding between Singaporean and PRC students. Yang's book describes obstacles in pursuing education abroad and calls for international students to develop a more realistic view of overseas education that takes into account a different education system and cultural environment. Despite the value of his qualitative studies, the limited number of interviewees in the PRC as well as the author's position as a PRC student who participated in the foreign-talent program himself paints a partial and dichotomous picture of educational desires in the two sites. Yang argues that the PRC students value intellectual discoveries and pursuit of education itself, whereas Singapore's education system is anti-scholarly and focuses on building entrepreneurial spirits in students. However, this antagonistic polarity presented in the book is only based on the data collected in educational settings and not on the PRC students' experience post-graduation. Thus, the author does not consider the potential transformation in students' lifelong desires later in their lives, highlighting the need for more longitudinal research in the field of international student migration to follow up with students' perceptions as they change.

The discussions of students' struggles with marginalization and identity have two key implications for urban education. First, the social exclusion and marginalization experienced by students highlight the cultural dissonance in urban classrooms. The increasing mobility and migration of students has created a larger, more diverse, and more complex student body. Given this heterogeneity, lack of integration could exacerbate racial and social tensions. This emphasizes the need for deeper integration between students and culturally responsive policies in urban education. Second, the socio-cultural conflict in urban classrooms leads to students' psychological transformations regarding the perceptions of their identity and their mindset towards their life trajectories, which necessitates a focus on students' psychological needs. Without a strong support system, we see the PRC students in the book suffering from rejection, loneliness, and sometimes depression. This lack of institutional resources for students' psychological well-being add to the current challenge of under-resourced urban schools. Through the portrayal of PRC students' lived experiences in Singapore, the book highlights the obstacles of integration in a diverse student body and calls for urban classrooms to allocate more resources to address students' well-being.

Qiyang Zhang (qzhang74@jhu.edu) is a Ph.D. student in the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University. When she was 14 years old, she went from China to Singapore as a part of the foreign talent program, which is the focus of this book. Her

research interests are in school-based mental health interventions and automated meta-analysis workflows.

Soumya Mittal (msoumya@upenn.edu) is pursuing a dual masters in International Education Development and Social Policy at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research focus is on education policy and access to quality education in developing regions. After her studies, Soumya intends to work on improving access to educational resources in India.

[Report accessibility issues and request help](#)

Copyright 2025 The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Online Urban Education Journal

Source URL: <https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-18-issue-2-spring-2021/review-international-mobility-and-educational-desire-chinese>