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**INTERNATIONAL
MOBILITY AND
EDUCATIONAL DESIRE**

Chinese Foreign Talent
Students in Singapore

Peidong Yang



Anthropological Studies of Education

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Peidong Yang

International Mobility and Educational Desire

Chinese Foreign Talent Students in Singapore

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Peidong Yang
Nanyang Technological University
Singapore

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For dad and mum

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Introduction

Abstract Opening with two ethnographic snapshots to illustrate the recent social tensions and controversies revolving around foreign students receiving Singaporean government scholarships, this introductory chapter locates the protagonists of this book, that is, “PRC scholars” in Singapore, in two contexts respectively: (1) the Singapore state’s “foreign talent” policy in response to economic and demographic challenges and (2) international educational mobility as an emerging phenomenon of interest to social scientific inquiry. This location-ing helps provide the essential backgrounds to the project and elucidates the contributions this book seeks to make to the studies of contemporary Singapore and to the studies of internationally mobile students. The chapter also provides an account of the ethnographic fieldwork underpinning the book, as well as an overview of the chapters to follow.

Keywords Singapore • China • Foreign talent • Immigration
• International student mobility • Educational desire

One day in February 2012, Sun Xu, a Chinese national and final-year undergraduate student at the National University of Singapore (NUS), posted a status update on the Chinese social networking website, *RenRen*, that would get him into trouble. Apparently venting

his frustration after having had some unpleasant encounters with Singaporeans over some trivial matters, the second half of Sun Xu's unfortunate status update read: "There are more dogs than humans in Singapore (*zai xinjiapo gou bi ren duo*)!"¹

After this status post was spotted and widely shared by netizens in Singapore, Sun Xu, who was revealed to be a recipient of a Singapore government-funded full scholarship, came under fire in just about every local media channel. For some days, this so-called "Sun Xu Incident" became a trending topic that many living in Singapore who read newspapers or used social media had something to say about. "How could someone who is obviously benefiting from Singapore be so ungrateful?"—so went the rhetorical question. Voices condemning this badmouthing ingrate were many and strong, and some explicitly called for him to be disciplined. The following month, NUS authorities formally investigated the case and, as a result, revoked the final year portion of Sun Xu's scholarship, fined him 3000 Singapore Dollars (S\$), and in addition, ordered him to perform three months of community service. When these disciplinary measures were announced, some in the public still felt that they were too lenient and demanded no less than the scholar's expulsion from the university (Au Yong, 2012).

Over the past two decades, the government of Singapore has had a policy of welcoming "foreign talent" immigrants as a response to dismal local birth rates as well as perceived human resource shortages. Part of this foreign talent policy involves proactively recruiting academically capable students from Asian developing countries and giving them generous scholarships that typically carry a "bond," that is, a legal requirement that the "scholar" works in Singapore for a number of years after graduation. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has been the largest of these foreign talent recruiting grounds, and Sun Xu was among the thousands of "PRC scholars" over the years who had made their way to Singapore.

PRC scholars in Singapore like Sun Xu constitute a type of "appropriated people" (Long, 2011). The rationale underlying Singapore's foreign talent scholarship schemes is simple. The foreign students' talent or potential is recognized and nurtured, but it is in the end to be appropriated, to some extent, by the benefactor state. Yet, recruiting foreign talent scholars is not merely a pragmatic strategy for Singapore. Arguably, there is also a public and symbolic dimension to such an act of appropriation. Two core values underpinning Singapore society's remarkable success, *openness* and *meritocracy*, are evidently encapsulated in such foreign talent scholar recruitment.

The foreign scholar figure functions as a public symbol. As social anthropologist Long (ibid., p. 45) writes in relation to the Indonesian state's construction and appropriation of national "human resources,"

[p]eople recruited to act as public symbols are constructed and disciplined in such a way as to ensure that the state feels it has made them its own; it feels comfortable with them, has a monopoly over their meaning, and can use them to do something or advance its own position.

What the 2012 "Sun Xu Incident" most conspicuously highlighted was how this logic of public symbolism could go awry and backfire. It showed how a foreign "scholar," who is expected to exemplify excellence in conduct as well to embody a gratitude commensurate with the privileges bestowed on him, defied these public expectations in a dramatic way. As a consequence, the state of Singapore as well as many Singaporeans struggled to feel comfortable with these appropriated subjects. The desired foreign talent subject, who seems to author his own script, subverts the monopoly of meaning imposed by the appropriating state.

The "Sun Xu Incident" was a dramatic but largely isolated occurrence. At one level, its cause may have been personal idiosyncrasy or, at most, an issue of cross-cultural communication. International students' lack of cross-cultural competence and the breakdown in communication between international students and the host society result in anti-social speech or behavior, of which there have been a number of cases.² Yet, the tension this episode dramatized is not unique. Scholarship students from China are not always perceived by Singaporeans to be sufficiently appreciative of what they have been given. "Appropriated people" apparently have their own desires and plans that may go beyond what the Singaporean scheme offers, thus making the Singaporean state's appropriation seem an act of restriction or limitation. In other words, appropriated people also wish to *appropriate*. From the Singaporean perspective, foreign talent scholars' such counter-appropriation can be unsettling or even offensive. The following excerpt, taken from a letter written by a member of the public to Singapore's English broadsheet *The Straits Times* describing her encounter with another PRC scholar, illustrates these tensions nicely:

At a seminar last year, I met a Chinese scholarship holder with a prestigious statutory board. In our short conversation, he lamented how he dreads having to serve his six-year bond, for after studying at a prestigious univer-

sity in Britain, he found there were many other attractive job opportunities, and he felt his talent was under-used in Singapore.

Given that the statutory board focused on Singapore's external enterprise growth, he was assured an exciting opportunity to work in its overseas offices as part of his training programme.

Not that it mattered, for he was thinking of how to break his bond, for he wanted success, not after serving his bond but immediately. He felt staying in Singapore would impede his ability to let his talent shine, for it was too small for him.

In fact, he shied away from being associated with Singaporeans. When I commented that his English was tinged with a British accent despite his years of study in Singapore, he beamed and said he was happy to get rid of his Singapore English accent: "Do I sound British? Oh great."

I left the seminar with a heavy heart. Have we made the right choice in grooming foreign talent, only to have them snub us? Indeed, we have allowed them to realise how fortunate they are to study in top universities abroad—so much so, they feel they are too good for Singapore. (He, 2008)

As such, frictions revolving around the foreign scholar in Singapore illustrate the complexity of *international educational mobility*, which often interlaces the instrumental desires and designs of the nation-state, of institutions of higher learning, with the autonomous desires and life-projects of individual social agents (such as mobile students and their families or communities). Potentially problematic psychosocial dynamics emerge from the frontiers of cross-cultural contact (as illustrated in the various "scholar scandals" in Singapore). Indeed, projects of international educational mobility are the crossroads of multiple desires, promises, aspirations originating from different parties that may converge as well as diverge and collude as well as collide.

Furthermore, troubles pertaining to the PRC scholars illustrate a broader and more consequential set of tensions that have developed around the foreign talent issue in Singapore in recent years. Since entering the twenty-first century, Singapore has witnessed a rapid influx of foreigners, which present numerous challenges to this small island-nation society. Not only are physical spaces "crowded out" and urban infrastructure put under increasing strain as a result, foreign talent also intensifies competition for education and employment. As a young and ethno-linguistically diverse nation, Singaporeans may be nervous that

their fragile sense of national identity and belonging will be diluted, as large numbers of foreign interlopers come to live among them without seeming to bother to assimilate or to even interact meaningfully.³ Well-rehearsed in patriotic discourse, Singaporeans further question the *loyalty* of the foreign talent, many of whom eventually become citizens; they sometimes resent foreign talent for sharing the fruits of the city-state's remarkable success without making equal measures of sacrifice and commitment (such as the compulsory military service all male Singaporean citizens render).

This book is an ethnographic account of the Chinese foreign talent scholarship students in Singapore, primarily as a case study in international educational mobility, situated against an increasingly controversial backdrop of foreign talent immigration in Singapore. My purpose, in a nutshell, is to present a focused examination of educational desire and social identity to explore broader concerns about immigration and cross-cultural encounter in the context of contemporary Singapore society.

SINGAPORE AND THE DESIRE FOR FOREIGN TALENT

Talent is desired. Everywhere. The advent of the “human capital” theory (e.g. Becker, 1964; Keeley, 2007) in the 1960s has had profound and widespread impacts on nation-states, corporations, and individuals across the globe. This human capital theory arose in conjunction with sociological analyses suggesting that the world had entered a post-industrial phase (Bell, 1973), an “information age” (Castells, 2000), and an era of the “knowledge economy” (Drucker, 1969), whereby, it is argued, “knowledge, training, and skills possessed by humans might be as important as, if not more important than, physical capital in the determination of [economic] output” (Chow, 2007, p. 208). As a result, many scholars and policymakers have come to place great emphasis on the importance of developing, attracting and retaining talented, knowledgeable, creative human subjects for the socioeconomic development of cities, regions, and nation-states (Castells, 1989; Florida, 2002; Reich, 1992).

In Asia, one of the most dynamic regions of world economic growth in the past four decades, many nation-states have embraced the discourse of human capital development and have implemented policies to that end (Chowdhury & Islam, 1993; Hoffman, 2010; Siu & Lau, 1998; Xiao & Tsang, 1999; Yusuf & Nabeshima, 2006). However, few Asian countries can measure up to the level of dedication given to developing and attracting

human talent by the Southeast Asian city-state of Singapore. In addition to a domestic education system singularly geared toward producing local talent useful for economic nation-building (Gopinathan, 2007), talent from beyond the island's shores is also keenly sought after. In 1997, then Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said in that year's National Day Rally speech, "In the information age, human talent, not physical resources or financial capital, is the key factor for economic competitiveness and success. We must therefore welcome the infusion of knowledge which foreign talent will bring" (quoted in Yeoh, 2013, p. 103).

Singapore desires foreign talent. But the need for human capital is only one factor among a more complex set of political-economic and socio-cultural calculations underpinning Singapore's foreign talent policies and programs. For instance, why does it seem that students from China are recruited in significantly larger numbers than students of any other nationality?⁴ And more generally, why do immigrants of Chinese ethnicity seem to be the preferred candidates for naturalization in Singapore? To locate the Chinese foreign talent students more precisely in a broader picture, a brief background account on the trajectory of Singapore's development in relation to its more recent pursuit of foreign talent is in order.

A strategic node in the 19th Century British colonial Far East, the *entrepôt* island Singapore, though located amidst a largely Malay-Islamic maritime Southeast Asia, attracted sojourners from near and far. Singapore developed into a multiethnic society by the end of the World War II, comprising an ethnic Chinese majority with the Malays and the Indians forming the largest minorities. In 1965, partly due to this Chinese ethnic predominance, Singapore's brief merger with the Federation of Malaya (founded in 1963 as a result of decolonization) fell apart, and the former was forced to become an independent state.

Having thus lost the Malaysian hinterland, Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) government, led by English-educated Straits Chinese men of elite backgrounds like Lee Kuan Yew, abandoned the previous import substitution economic model in favor of a developmental model based on foreign direct investment and export-oriented manufacturing (Rodan, 1989). The PAP put in place a "soft authoritarian" (Roy, 1994) or "state corporatist" (D. Brown, 1994) political system to ensure sociopolitical stability, and kept down the labor costs through coopting the trade union movement. This strategy worked, and by the late 1970s, it was clear that the vulnerable independent island-state of Singapore had not only survived but was on its way to becoming one of Asia's "tiger economies." Based on

its remarkable performance in developing the economy, the PAP enjoyed overwhelming mass legitimacy. Its dominant position remains until the present day, as the only party to have formed government since 1959.

Since late 1970s, several important shifts occurred in Singapore's economic and sociopolitical landscapes. The official cultural policies were reoriented to counter what the PAP state feared as "Western corruptive influences" on the Singapore value system (Kong, 2000). In the 1980s, a set of state-propagated discourses were organized around the master signifier of "Asian values," in which the *Chinese* Confucian values made up the dominant component (Hill, 2000; Kuah, 1990). This "Asian values" discourse coincided with the official launch of a "Speak Mandarin Campaign," underpinned by the idea that, for the majority Chinese Singaporeans, their Chinese "mother tongue" would be a repository of their "Confucian values" (Bokhorse-Heng, 1999; Newman, 1988). This emphasis on Mandarin was somewhat ironic because it was southern Chinese dialects such as Hokkien and Teochew, rather than Mandarin (or *Putonghua*), that were the mother tongues of most ethnic Chinese in Singapore up to that time.

The timing of the 1979 launch of "Speak Mandarin Campaign" was interesting, for it occurred only a year after China's then-paramount leader Deng Xiaoping initiated China's post-Mao market reforms, after seeking inspiration and advice from Lee Kuan Yew during a 1978 visit to Singapore. Those who agree with Wee's (2003) opinion that language policy in Singapore has been characterized by "linguistic instrumentalism" might interpret this sudden favorable turn toward Mandarin as the Singapore state's pragmatic response to changing external circumstances, as Mandarin would be useful in accessing China as a potentially desirable destination for investment. Subsequently, China also became a huge market and, most pertinently for our discussion here, a significant source of labor and talent supply for Singapore.

Meanwhile, as the homeland of Confucianism, and where Mandarin originated, China also started to loom large over Singapore at cultural and symbolic levels, given Singapore's self-proclamation as ideologically and culturally Confucian. Regardless whether the interest in China was instrumental or otherwise, some scholars (e.g. Lai, 1995, p. 142; E. K. B. Tan, 2003; Teng, 2005) have observed that Singapore began to be "Sinicized" in the 1980s. Indeed, Singaporean sociologist Daniel Goh (2012, 2014) argues that China's recent global ascendancy has exerted palpable reorienting influences over the imaginaries of Singapore's governing elite and the island-state's cultural and political self-identity.

Also during the 1980s, the government of Singapore began to feel the pressure to remain economically competitive. As local wage levels and living standards rose dramatically, the imperative to develop a more skilled workforce compatible with the knowledge-based global economy loomed large (Low, 2002a). Meanwhile, rapid industrialization had led to a sharp decline in fertility rates to well below the replacement level (Hudson, 2013; Sun, 2011) and a significant “brain drain” due to emigration (E. S. Tan, 2005), both of which deeply worried the Singapore state.

Thus, the Singapore state’s pursuit of foreign talent should be seen as fundamentally driven by pragmatic concerns (i.e. economy and demography), yet at the same time subtly colored by *cultural* ideologies and imaginaries.⁵ The PAP state insists on “multiracialism” as a pillar of the Singapore society (Chua, 2009), and the ratio between various racial/ethnic groups has altered only very slightly in the fifty years since independence (see Nasir & Turner, 2014, p. 18). Among Singapore’s ethnic groups, the Chinese is at once the most educationally and socioeconomically advanced and the population with the lowest fertility rates since at least 1980 (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2014, p. 27). Foreign talent of Chinese ethnicity is particularly desirable because they help to shore up the Chinese ethnic ratio in Singapore, as some scholars have pointed out (Yeoh & Lin, 2013, p. 35; Yim, 2011, p. 65). Because race is a sensitive topic, the Singapore state neither elaborates on the rationales behind its immigration policy nor discloses detailed information on the ethnonational composition of immigration. It is in this broader picture that the specific sub-group of foreign talent that this book looks at, namely PRC scholarship students, should be situated.

A more detailed look at Singapore’s concrete foreign talent policies and programs, specifically the scholarship schemes, will be provided in the next chapter. It suffices here to note that, since the issue of attracting foreign talent was first raised in the 1980s, and various measures and programs were implemented throughout the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, both Singapore’s economy and population have exhibited strong rising trajectories. Between 1990 and 2014, Singapore’s average annual GDP growth rate was 6.3%,⁶ a remarkable figure for an already highly developed economy; today, per capita GDP puts Singapore among the wealthiest countries in the world. Population wise, in 1990, three million people lived on the island, of which 90% were citizens; by mid-2014, the total population had risen to 5.47 million, of which Singapore citizens accounted for just over 61%.⁷ Both the census

years of 1990 and 2000 registered non-resident population growths of more than 9%. The 2000s saw particularly high rates of population inflow: the non-resident population growth rate saw a peak in 2008, at a staggering 19%, though this soon declined in the following years. The growth rate of permanent residents peaked in 2009 at 11.5% (“Yearbook of Statistics Singapore 2015,” 2013). The extent to which immigrants from China have contributed to these rapid growth has been variously estimated. In 2008, one source suggested that the total number of citizens and permanent residents of PRC background and PRC migrants was “close to one million” (The Straits Times, 2008). However, a government official swiftly criticized this estimate as too many (Yong, 2008). A study published in 2011 suggested the range of 700,000–800,000 (Yim, 2011, p. 301). Without authoritative data, these estimates remain the best clues available.

Given this rapid increase in foreigner presence within a relatively short span of time, sentiments of “anxiety” or “resentment” have arisen from native Singaporeans (Koh, 2003; Vasu et al., 2014; Yang, 2014; Yap, Koh, & Soon, 2015; Yeoh & Lin, 2013). Overtly xenophobic discourse tends to be confined to the online digital space (Gomes, 2014) rather than in offline real social interactions (Philomin, 2015). Nevertheless, Singaporeans have registered their strong discontent against the government’s foreign talent policy. In the 2011 general election, the PAP suffered its worst loss in its more than fifty years in power. One of the main causes of electoral dissatisfaction was foreign talent. In the presidential election in 2012, independent candidate Tan Cheng Bock lost the contest to PAP veteran Tony Tan only by a tiny margin; revealingly, the former’s election slogan was “Think Singaporeans First!” In February 2013, a government *Population White Paper*, which mentioned a projected population of 6.9 million in 2030 (*population.sg*), prompted several thousand—some say 5000—people to protest in public. During the protest, a placard saying “Singapore for Singaporeans” emerged and made media headlines around the world.

It is against the backdrop of this recent development that I situate the Chinese foreign talent students’ educational journeys and encounters. From the perspective of the Singapore state, one assumed advantage of appropriating foreign talent through scholarship programs is that these subjects are more likely to transition into Singaporean subjects because of their indebtedness (both legal and moral) to the city-state’s regime and society. Furthermore, they are more likely to do so smoothly because of their relatively long immersion in Singapore in the form of receiving education locally. While I believe these assumptions are

on the whole quite true, the cases cited at the opening of this chapter show that a smooth acculturation process cannot be taken for granted. Frictions seem inevitable in cross-cultural encounters. Furthermore, in projects of international educational mobility, students' aspirations are stimulated and shaped, their identities are transformed and re-negotiated, their desires are met or frustrated; and all these can spill over the neat top-down designs of the nation-state and its desire to use education to the end of subject-formation. In this book, I precisely aim to account for such a "seamy" side to students' lived experience of educational mobility, particularly in relation to desire and social identity. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to discuss some of the pertinent issues relating to international student mobility,⁸ which shall lead to the concept at the heart of this book—*educational desire*.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY AND EDUCATIONAL DESIRE

The world has seen sustained growth in tertiary-level international student mobility in the past decades. Between 1990 and 2013, the number of students enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship increased from 1.3 million to nearly 4.5 million, representing an average annual growth rate of 6% (OECD, 2013). Today, while more than half of these international students in higher education hail from Asia, the top five destinations all remain Western and predominantly Anglophone countries: the USA (17% of all international students worldwide), the UK (13%), Australia (6%), Germany (6%) and France (6%) (UNESCO, 2013).

The reasons behind such a significant expansion in international educational mobility are complex, but one way to apprehend these is through the conceptual prism of neoliberal globalization. Neoliberalism can be understood as a political and economic philosophy that advocates "the extension of market (and market-like) forms of governance, rule and control across [...] all spheres of social life" (Peck & Tickell, 2006, p. 28). In relation to higher education (HE) and its internationalization, one of the most significant consequences of neo-liberalization has been the restructuring of the HE sectors across many developed nations which forced HE institutions to act increasingly like corporate entities in a global marketplace of educational products, competing for students (Lynch, 2006; Marginson, 2008; Sidhu, 2006). Confronted with such commodified education for which

students are increasingly expected to pay, they accordingly take on the neoliberal subjectivity of educational customers harboring consumer desires.

Globalization, on the other hand, can be understood as the “transformation in the organization of human affairs by linking together and expanding human activity across regions and continents” (Held & McGrew, 2000, p. 54). While in theory globalization need not have been neoliberal, in reality, the globalization since the 1970s has had a distinct neoliberal thrust. In the context of education, globalization has meant that supranational (e.g. global and regional) institutions and processes have become formidable forces alongside the nation-state in shaping education policy and governance (Moutsios, 2009; Susan Robertson, 2009; Rubenson, 2008), and consequently, student mobility. The case of Singapore’s interest and investment in international student mobility—as I shall detail in Chapter 2—illustrates this point well. While the city-state’s foreign talent student strategy is no doubt a response to emerging global conditions and trends, it also shows the specific vision and agency of the nation-state. What distinguishes Singapore from countries that treat international education primarily as an export industry is the greater emphasis placed on human resource development and nation-building.

The impact of neoliberal globalization is not just top-down, affecting powerful institutions; it also affects individuals on the ground insofar as speedy global circulation of images and ideas, facilitated by advanced information technologies, generates powerful social imaginaries about pursuing education abroad among young people, their families, and their communities (Appadurai, 1996; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The phenomenal economic development of the Asian countries in recent decades gave rise to a huge pool of young people interested in and capable of pursuing border-crossing higher education. In short, the significant rise in student mobility worldwide should be understood in terms of the articulation of the strategies of institutions at various levels and scales with the social imaginaries of peoples, all set in the background of neoliberal globalization (Rizvi, 2011).

Lived Experiences of Educational Mobility

In perhaps the most comprehensive review and synthesis of literature on student mobility and higher education internationalization to-date, Brooks and Waters (2011, p. 48) observe that

Research on student mobility tends to be divided into work on large-scale student flows and the corresponding international, national, regional and

institutional policies on the one hand, and in-depth, qualitative empirical research into individual student experience on the other.

Indeed, the foregoing section has drawn largely on the first strand of policy-centered scholarship on HE internationalization and student mobility. While this policy background is indispensable for understanding the rise of student mobility as a worldwide phenomenon, it is the second and more *people-centered* strand of literature with which this book is most concerned.

However, I propose here that, within the scholarship that qualitatively examines the multifarious experiences of internationally mobile students, a further distinction can be and should be made between those studies which are primarily concerned with international students as *subjects of mobility* and accordingly foreground their desires, practices and experiences in relation to transnational mobility, citizenship and belonging on the one hand, and those studies that are primarily concerned with international students as cross-cultural *learning subjects* and accordingly focus on their *educational* experiences and encounters on the other hand. Making such a distinction does not mean that these two domains of scholarship are totally separate. Instead, it is more useful to view them as two ends in a broad spectrum of research literature. Indeed, scholarship that strikes a balance between these two foci seems to be emerging (e.g. Soong, 2016). Nevertheless, drawing this conceptual distinction is helpful in creating a map of existing research in which the present book can be located.

The former type of scholarship has mainly come from sociocultural anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers. The most substantial and recent are works by Fong (2011), Baas (2010), Robertson (2013b), and Waters (2008). Fong examines the ways in which pursuing higher education abroad has become the main strategy by which many members of China's urban "one-child" generation quest for "social, cultural, and sometimes legal citizenship in the developed world" (2011, p. 12). Similarly, Baas (2010) documents young Indian adults' quest for permanent residency in Australia, and ultimately for greater transnational mobility, whether *imagined* or real, through pursuing tertiary education there. Robertson's (2013b) work, also based on the Australian experience, conceptualizes the nexus between international education and nation-state immigration policy. She examines *student-migrants'* staggered journeys of navigating this "education-migration nexus" and

their variegated experiences of leading transnational social lives. Finally, Waters's (2008) work looks at educational migration, often family-based, from Hong Kong to Canada, and the manners in which such trajectories represent a strategy of cultural capital formation and class position reproduction in a transnational field characterized by uneven sociocultural and power geographies.

Arguably the most prominent feature of the body of scholarship exemplified by these works is an abiding engagement with the notion of *transnationalism*, and associated issues such as im/mobility, citizenship, and border-crossing social relations and practices. Indeed, for this strand of scholarship, the key conceptual and theoretical reference points can be located primarily in the seminal literature on transnationalism and "flexible citizenship" (e.g. Appadurai, 1996; Basch, Schiller, & Blanc-Szanton, 1994; Faist, 2000; Hannerz, 1996; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Ong, 1999). In other words, if, following Robertson (2013b), the moniker *student-migrant* is adopted to designate the subject of international educational mobility, the emphasis is placed decidedly on the *migrant*. What is accentuated above all is the manner in which transnational *mobility*, real or imagined, is the central object of desire around which the student experiences are organized. For this reason, I venture to characterize this body of scholarship as having an emphasis on *mobility desire*. In addition to the centrality of transnationalism and mobility, another feature of this scholarship is that common analytical categories and foci seem to reflect sociology and anthropology's characteristic preoccupation with themes such as class, social mobility, gender, and family/kinship (e.g. Huang & Yeoh, 2005; Kajanus, 2015; Sin, 2009; Waters, 2005).

The second main body of literature on the human dimension of international education mobility, in contrast, retains the focus on the first component in the term "student-migrant"—the *student*. Typically written by educationalists specializing in intercultural education or communication scholars and psychologists, this equally substantial body of scholarship deals primarily with matters that arise in relation to the mobile student as a *learner*—not just narrowly as a learner of academic knowledge or foreign languages, but also of cosmopolitan lifestyles and competencies, as well as the self-knowledge gained through the study-sojourn process, all of which are the rewards promised for a border-crossing education.

By far the majority of this research literature has highlighted the problems and difficulties experienced by international students, pointing to the often significant gaps between international students' imaginaries,

aspirations and objectives on the one hand and lived realities on the other. For example, researchers have variously examined the “culture shock” (e.g. Adler, 1975; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), “learning/education shock” (e.g. Campbell & Li, 2008; Gu & Maley, 2008; Yamazaki, 2005; Zhang & Brunton, 2007), “language shock” (e.g. Agar, 1996; L. Brown, 2008; Ryan & Twibell, 2000), “communication shock” (e.g. Aveni, 2005; Holmes, 2004, 2007) that international students in higher education typically encounter and struggle with.

Of particular relevance are issues of cross-cultural relations, since in this book I focus on these relations in the educational setting as Singapore’s foreign talent tensions writ small. In a stock-taking account, Marginson and Sawir (2011, p. 100) note that, “In cross-cultural relations in international education, the local/foreigner distinction is often the main element at play.” Indeed, much of existing literature has noted that social marginalization and “ghettoization” are not uncommon for many international students (e.g. L. Brown & Holloway, 2008; Kim, 1988; Tian & Lowe, 2009), often due to the indifference, prejudice, and even abuse from the local population and society, sometimes motivated by racism (e.g. Baas, 2010; Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007). Such experiences are particularly frustrating and painful because many studies confirm that among international students there is a strong desire to achieve contact, friendship and social engagement with the locals in the destination country (L. Brown, 2009a, 2009b; Holmes, 2007; Lewthwaite, 1996; Marginson, 2014). Such connections are coveted not only for instrumental benefits such as improved language/communication competencies and/or enhanced social support, but more importantly because internationally mobile students are often driven by the imaginaries and desires of cosmopolitan subjectivities and foreign lifestyles which they envision would result from interacting with host nationals (Rizvi, 2000, 2011). When such interactions fail to take place, international students often experience a sense of “deep disillusionment” (L. Brown, 2009b, p. 439).

Despite these issues, educational mobility as a holistic learning process and experience nevertheless promises significant rewards. At the subjective level pertaining to the student’s social identity and selfhood, Milstein (2005) notes that studying abroad helps the students achieve a revised self-understanding; Murphy-Lejeune (2003, p. 113) characterizes the experience as a “maturing process,” which “takes the shape of a personal expansion, an opening of one’s potential universe.” More recently, Simon Marginson (2014) offers an understanding of the subjective international

student experience as “self-formation.” Highly critical of a persisting paradigm in intercultural education that assumes cultures to be relatively fixed and regards the mobile student as a passive figure needing to “adapt” or “adjust,” Marginson’s *self-formation* approach sees the international student as a strongly *agentive* being, actively and consciously involved in the project of self-making and self-transformation. As Marginson and Sawir (2011, pp. 137–138) eloquently state:

Self-formation means working on oneself. [...] In self-formation people consciously fashion themselves as they go, working critically and using feedback from themselves (and others). They have difficulty making themselves what they want to be. Mostly, things work out differently from the way that was imagined in advance. But people persist, reshaping their intentions as they go. They oscillate between pushing against what they see as their own inadequacies, temporarily accepting those limitations, and then thrusting forward again. *For international students, changing themselves is the whole point of international education* (emphases added).

My approach toward examining the Chinese foreign talent scholars’ Singapore experiences in this book (Chapters 4, 5 and 6) very much resonates with this understanding. I sometimes still employ terms such as “adjustment” or “adaptation” (e.g. Chapter 4), but I use them simply to denote the pauses and changes in behavior and thinking that occur in mobile students upon entering a different educational and sociocultural environment. Far from subscribing to any form of cultural essentialism, my approach sees identity, culture, and the self as “liquid” (Dervin, 2011) as well as “open and fluid” (Marginson & Sawir, 2011, p. 160).

While Marginson’s self-formation approach views people as in charge of their own identities, it must be noted that they are never *completely* so. As previous literature has abundantly demonstrated, international students are also “other-formed,” to the extent that *otherness*, be it manifested in the local/host divide, a different educational system or sociocultural environment, significantly shapes their experiences and the outcomes of the journey of educational mobility. To this extent, Marginson and Sawir (2011, p. 138) rightly point out the *unpredictability* and *open-endedness* of subjective development for international students. The two episodes with which I opened this chapter are illustrative of this unpredictability, in a controversial way.

In briefly and partially reviewing what I consider the second main strand of literature on international students' experiences, what I aim to highlight are the desires of these subjects for *learning*, not only academic learning, but also learning for the purpose of personal change, development, and maturation through confronting or engaging with otherness. In both a literal and a metaphoric sense, this process can be regarded as an *educational* one. Thus, as opposed to the first body of scholarship emphasizing international students' mobility desire, I venture to characterize this latter body of scholarship as one emphasizing the *educational desire*—which I now turn to define and conceptualize.

Educational Desire

“Education desire” is a term used by anthropologist Andrew Kipnis (2011a) to designate the enormous desire for educational qualifications and attainment that he observed in contemporary China. In my definition, educational desire does include this simple descriptive sense, but it also encompasses an expanded set of meanings, together with certain theoretical as well as empirical connotations associated with the term *desire*.

I define educational desire, at the most basic level, as the desire for receiving education or for pursuing learning, which may be motivated by the instrumental value of education in enabling social mobility, by the non-instrumentalist intellectual stimulation and satisfaction that learning brings, or simply by the allure of educational qualifications as a form of symbolic capital. Like Kipnis, I believe that such a desire is not only prevalent but also very intense for students in contemporary China, including, but perhaps especially for, those who become Singapore's foreign talent scholarship recipients. I also maintain that the specific characters and contextual manifestations of educational desire must be better appreciated in order to understand its implications for student experience. This book aims at this understanding.

But furthermore, in connection with the foregoing discussion of international student mobility, by educational desire I also refer to all manners of aspirations, longings, and interests that students experience and develop in an evolving way as they pursue and undergo education across national, cultural, linguistic and other borders and boundaries. These may include, for instance, the desire for interaction with local peers or other population groups in the host country context; the desire for the understanding of or the “integration” into the host society;⁹ the desire for self-transformation,

self-development, self-discovery, and self-fashioning as Marginson has described. Indeed, to the extent that journeys of educational mobility are often compared to journeys of growing up and learning about life, all those desires that take shape or become manifest in educational or pedagogical processes are, for me, educational desires. It is this expansive domain of educational desire that is ultimately the issue under examination in this book. However, I have chosen the term *desire* not just because it serves as a felicitous ethnographic “macro-trope” (Rumsey, 2004) for this text; there are specific connotations—both theoretical and empirical—to the term that I find useful and appropriate.

Theoretically, desire has been conceptualized on the one hand as a technology of power/governing and yet, on the other hand, as an arguably ungovernable force. Developing Foucault’s (1991) seminal idea of governmentality, Nicolas Rose famously argued that in advanced liberal democracies, power governs by granting the subjects governed the freedoms as well as the responsibilities to make choices, to aspire, and to *desire* (Gordon, 1991; Rose, 1999; Rose & Miller, 2008). Anthropologist Rofel (2007, p. 1) concurs that, “[t]he production of desire lies at the heart of global processes,” and she extends this theoretical perspective of neoliberal governmentality to the context of reform-era China to argue that “If socialist power operated on the terrain of ‘consciousness’, post-socialist power operates on the site of ‘desire’ ” (p. 6). Kipnis extends this thinking into the context of Chinese education, showing how educational desire is the site on which the “conduct of conduct” is exercised by a multi-scalar network of powers that shapes human subjectivity and behavior in Chinese schooling. In short, the production of desire and the constitution of desiring subjects, have been recognized as a working logic of power and governing. The shaping and transformation of educational desire and subjectivity to be examined in the subsequent chapters of this book are thus framed as processes in which power and governmentality meet individual agency.

Yet, desire, while being the site of governmentality, also seems to refuse being fully captured. In their study of international students in Singapore from a Deleuzian perspective on desire, Collins and colleagues (2014) note that desire is socially generated; it is inseparable from imagination; and most importantly, it “is about becoming much more than being” and it focuses “on the future and motivations to escape natural, cultural, or governmental limitations on the body” (p. 665). To stress the “becomingness” of desire as opposed to mere “being” is to highlight the generativity of desire, as a force that is not fully governmentalized. It is no doubt

a product of power, yet it never seems entirely so, and can outstrip and outsmart the power that produces it. The two cases cited at the beginning of this chapter, particularly the second one, illustrate this point well; the ethnographic chapters that follow contain more cases illustrating the ungovernable and unpredictable consequences of educational desires.

In addition to these theoretical implications, certain common sense connotations of the term desire also make it especially appropriate in describing the issues I explore in this book. Firstly, although in the context of education, the term *aspiration* is more often used (e.g., the “capacity to aspire” as coined by Appadurai, 2004), desire is preferable here because it does not carry the normative baggage associated with aspiration. Put simply, while aspiration is assumed to be a “good thing,” desire has a neutrality to it. This neutrality not only allows me to deconstruct the normalizing processes in education more effectively, it is also more appropriate for cases where educational aspirations lead to potentially controversial consequences, such as they sometimes do in the case of Singapore’s foreign talent scholarship students. Secondly, desire also connotes certain *intensity*. Thus, desire best describes the intensity of the imaginations that drives the pursuit of educational mobility, the intensity of disappointment when imaginations do not materialize, and the intensity of frustration experienced by mobile students whose evolving longings have gone beyond the institutionalized structures of educational mobility and thus experience the latter as constraints. Affects such as disappointment, disillusionment, and frustration, and psychosocial processes such as otherization, self-consciousness or even self-loathing, as various chapters of this book report on ethnographically, are, for me, all manifestations of educational desire.

Not all international students are the same (Choudaha, Orosz, & Chang, 2012). Thus, not all educational desires found in international mobility are the same. In this book, my focus is on a group of mobile Chinese students, by and large at tertiary-level, who also happened to be foreign talent recruited by the city-state Singapore. This intersectionality means that while PRC scholars in Singapore certainly exhibit some commonalities with international students as a general category, they also have some specific traits. The exact ways in which such commonalities and specificities manifest are to be found in the chapters that follow. Of late, research interest in internationally mobile Chinese students appears to be gathering force (Dervin, 2014, 2015; Hansen & Thøgersen, 2015), and this emerging subset of literature so far also seems to be a combination of research on mobility desire and educational desire. This book joins this growing literature on Chinese international students, with a focus on their educational desire.

OF “FOREIGN TALENT,” BY A “FOREIGN TALENT”: THE ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

In November 2002, as I awaited with excitement and trepidation my impending journey to Singapore—in fact my first journey abroad(!)—as a scholar under the “SM2” scheme (one of Singapore’s three major PRC scholarship schemes; see Chapter 2), I had never imagined that more than a decade later I would actually be writing a book about foreign talent and Singapore. The close to six years I spent in the city-state as an international student was perhaps not only a long period of incubation for this study, but also a kind of protracted, unconscious ethnographic fieldwork—even before I knew the word “ethnography.” There can be no denying that my personal biography influenced what I write in the following pages, and I believe I know better than many other people the experiences of the PRC scholars, by simply having been one of them. On the other hand, I also stress that this work is not auto-ethnographic.

Underpinning this book are ethnographic fieldworks conducted at two sites, between April 2011 and July 2012 (with a hiatus in February–April 2012). At the end of March 2011, I returned to my hometown in China, Nanchang, the provincial seat of Jiangxi (Fig. 1.1), where I documented Singapore’s recruitment of Chinese senior middle school students and examined how the students, the schools, the teachers and the parents responded to the scholarship scheme. Choosing my hometown for this stage of the fieldwork was due foremost to logistic and access reasons, but considering that choosing a site was inevitable, Nanchang, Jiangxi, as an average Chinese city and province, does offer a typical view of the foreign talent student recruitment process.

During my Nanchang fieldwork, which lasted from April to July 2011, I followed two lines of inquiry. The first consisted in following closely the 15th batch SM2 recruitment in the province. I managed to meet 19 out of the 24 pre-interview candidates who had passed the SM2 written exams weeks earlier. I asked them to complete a simple qualitative questionnaire. In addition, with a subset of these candidates who were from my own former senior middle school, “School A,” I held a small group discussion. In this way, I became well acquainted with over half a dozen Nanchang SM2 candidates and their parents, with whom I remained in touch until well after the selection was concluded in late May. My second line of inquiry consisted of a broader ethnographic examination of the Chinese middle school milieu, again based on School A, which

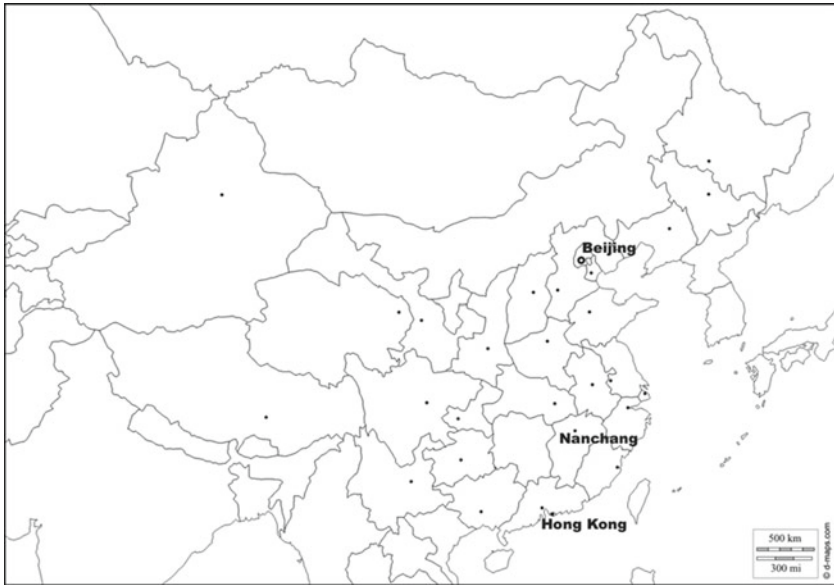


Fig. 1.1 City of Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, China

was and is one of the most academically successful public schools in Nanchang City as well as in Jiangxi Province (see Yang, 2016). In a three-month stint at this school, I was assigned the role of an “assistant head teacher,” which gave me the opportunities to interact with teachers, students, and school leaders, as well as to observe lessons and participate in some student activities.

Having completed the China stage, I entered Singapore in August 2011 to carry out the second and the major stage of the fieldwork. My primary fieldwork site was what I will in this book call the “University Institute Singapore” (“UIS”)—a well-established local public university with a rising global profile. There, I continued to carry out participant observation and ethnographic interviewing among two broad categories of informants: (1) PRC scholars (from SM1/2/3 programs; see Chapter 2) who were then undergraduate students at UIS (aged 19–24), and, (2) scholars who had completed their undergraduate education and had moved on to professional work or postgraduate education locally (aged 25–30). Since this book is focused on educational desire, participants of the second category

do not feature prominently except when their recollections or reflections on their experience as international students shed light on relevant issues.

I started off fieldwork in UIS with my old networks in Singapore, and such networks gradually extended to a larger cohort of research participants. My interviewees included a handful of old acquaintances, but the majority were new connections made in the field. Many of these younger scholars, who often nicely addressed me as “senior” (*xuezhang*), welcomed me into their worlds and shared with me their stories, if only temporarily. Our conversations were in most cases natural and frank—the assumptions were that I was one of them and that I would understand and sympathize with their experiences. Both were true.

In the numerous meal gatherings, campus coffee/chat sessions and a variety of other social occasions (such as birthday parties), I came into contact with up to two hundred PRC scholars, current or former. Most of these contacts and interactions were transient; but the conversations, which ran through the entire length of my Singapore fieldwork, filled my notebooks with many life stories, fragments of narratives, and specimens of affects, affording me a good overall sense of the experiences, ethos, and outlooks of these PRC foreign talent subjects. When opportunities arose, I also conducted interviews in more formal ways. I counted altogether 49 interviewees, out of which 29 were undergraduates (Male = 14, Female = 15; SM1 = 5, SM2 = 13, SM3 = 11) and 20 were ex-scholars who had graduated (Male = 13, Female = 7; SM1 = 4, SM2 = 10, SM3 = 6). The interviews were mostly one-to-one but occasionally group-based; they typically lasted between one and two hours; all were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, and about half were audio-recorded. Inevitably, this collection of interviews was the outcome of contingent factors such as the informants’ willingness or eagerness to share, their levels of sincerity and articulacy when sharing, the snow-balling strategy I used in informant recruitment, and, above all, serendipity.

During the post-fieldwork writing-up stage, I paid sustained attention to Singapore through the internet and news media, especially about anything related to my topic. Subsequently in August 2014, I came back to work in Singapore. Thus, while this book was largely based on data collection that took place in 2011–12, I have been able to provide some updates and amendments wherever possible and/or appropriate based on information that came my way in more haphazard and opportunistic ways after 2012.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

Chapter 2 provides further contexts necessary to this study. It is comprised of two parts. The first part takes a closer look at Singapore's foreign talent policy in general terms, before it focuses on foreign talent scholarship programs and introduces the three specific PRC scholarship schemes. The second part unfolds around a symbolically meaningful ethnographic vignette from the China leg of my fieldwork, which helps illuminate the ways in which Chinese students are shaped as subjects of educational desires. Such educational desires and subjectivities, manifested in their discourse and dispositions, will have implications for their subsequent educational sojourn experience when they become appropriated talent in Singapore.

Chapter 3 provides detailed information about the "SM2" program—a program through which the Singapore government has been recruiting teenage Chinese students for nearly two decades. This is followed by an ethnographic account of the SM2 recruitment process in China's Jiangxi Province in 2011, which explores what various stakeholders, such as the eligible Chinese schools, teachers, students' parents, but most importantly, what the scholar-candidates themselves thought and said about becoming foreign talent for Singapore.

Chapter 4 deals with the minutiae of the PRC scholars' cross-cultural experiences through examining their encounters with "Singlish" and the Singaporean as a figure of otherness in the context of a university campus. Focusing on the PRC scholars' discourses and perceptions, this chapter attends to the ways in which the multicultural university campus could be a potentially treacherous terrain where traps of stereotyping and otherizing lie hidden. It shows the desire for intercultural connection is often accompanied by its frustration and failure.

Again set in the context of the UIS campus, Chapter 5 ethnographically explores an experience of gaining self-consciousness and undergoing identity transformation that characterized some Chinese students' Singapore educational sojourn. This experience hinges on an idiom of "very China"-ness, which was simultaneously an emic term found in the PRC scholars' discourse as well as an etic term that I appropriate to narrate this process of self-consciousness and identity transformation. Compared to Chapter 4, this chapter puts more emphasis on the generativity of educational desire.

The final chapter, Chapter 6, looks at the PRC scholars' complex and sometimes self-contradictory attitudes and discourses regarding the meaning or purpose of the undergraduate education, as they encountered

it at the UIS. I explore, on the one hand, how PRC scholars exhibit certain idealistic educational desires that are met with mismatch and disillusionment and, on the other hand, how the Singaporean/UIS pedagogical context reshapes their educational subjectivities and discourses.

All in all, this book depicts, with ethnographic details, the social lives of educational desires as they cross national, cultural and other boundaries—material or symbolic. It shows how desires, imaginaries, and aspirations ignited in state-initiated educational projects may go beyond or even go against the scope prescribed by the regimes of power that initiate them. The book shows how educational desires and sociocultural identities are ongoing personal projects for international students. It shows how these desires and identities are constantly revised and renegotiated, held onto or abandoned, as educational sojourners navigate conflicted experiences of fulfillment, frustration, and failure.

NOTES

1. To compare someone to a dog is a common insult in Chinese language.
2. See the case of Wang Pengfei, another Chinese student who made remarks that many considered derogatory toward Singapore, as mentioned by Yeoh and Lin (2013, p. 45); see also Soon and Tan (2013). Another notorious case was Alvin Tan, an ASEAN scholarship recipient and NUS law undergraduate: he was stripped of his scholarship in 2012 after his blog, which contained many images and videos of his sexual activities with his girlfriend was exposed to the public.
3. The National Orientations of Singaporeans Survey carried out by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in 2009 showed that, among the 2016 Singaporeans (aged 21–64) polled, the percentage that agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “the policy to attract more foreign talent will weaken Singaporeans’ feeling as one nation, one people” was 63%, compared to only 38% in 1998 (Nasir and Turner 2014, p. 59).
4. As I shall mention later, due to the sensitivity of the issue of race, the Singapore government does not release data on the ethno-national background of immigrant populations, including foreign students. In accordance, nor do educational institutions such as universities disclose such information. Evidence based on my long-term field observation indicates, however, that Chinese students are the most numerous among those that are purposefully recruited by Singapore government.
5. Extrapolating from Lee Kuan Yew’s personal beliefs and the influence such personal beliefs had had on policymaking in Singapore, observers such as Michael Barr (2000) would go as far as to say *racial* ideologies.

6. Calculated based on World Bank data: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG> (accessed 21 September 2015).
7. *Population Trends 2014* (ISSN 1793–2424), Department of Statistics, Singapore. http://www.singstat.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/publications/publications_and_papers/population_and_population_structure/population2014.pdf (accessed 20 September 2015).
8. In this book, I focus on international student mobility at the tertiary level, namely, in the context of higher education.
9. I share with Wieviorka (2013) a skeptical view about the term “integration,” for in the context of increasing social diversity and transnationality, the meaning of the term cannot be taken as a given, but must be itself subject to inquiry.

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Contexts: Singapore's Foreign Talent Programs and the Chinese Middle School as a Recruiting Ground

Abstract This chapter comprises two parts. The first part looks at Singapore's foreign talent policy in general terms, reviewing the city-state's talent-friendly foreign workforce management system and immigration regime; it then details several prominent foreign talent scholarship schemes since the 1990s, particularly three schemes targeting China. The second part unfolds around a symbolically rich event observed during the China leg of my fieldwork, which illuminates the ways in which Chinese students are shaped as subjects of educational desires. It is argued that Chinese educational desire is shaped according to two logics simultaneously, one involving an ideologized normalization emphasizing virtues and values, the other being a pragmatic attitude stressing extrinsic utilities and instrumental outcomes. This has important implications for the Chinese scholars' subsequent educational experiences in Singapore.

Keywords Singapore • Foreign talent policy • PRC scholarships • SM1/2/3 • Chinese middle school • Educational desire

SINGAPORE'S FOREIGN TALENT PROGRAMS

Foreign talent policy consists of an ensemble of “concrete and carefully orchestrated strategies to attract and retain talents” (Yeoh, 2013, p. 103), implemented across a range of policy domains by an array of state agencies. Some of these policy measures are generic, such as the liberalization of immigration and naturalization, whereas others are specific and targeted, such as the scholarship programs and visa schemes applicable to select groups of foreigners. Below, I review some of these key policy measures in Singapore, zeroing in on the programs that make up the central concern of this book.

GENERAL PROGRAM: FOREIGN WORKFORCE AND IMMIGRATION REGIME

In 1980, the Singapore government began purposefully to attract talented foreigners by forming two dedicated state organs: the Professionals Information and Placement Service (PIPS) and the Committee for Attracting Talent to Singapore (CATS) (Quah, 1984). These two agencies were subsequently superseded by various other organizational arrangements,¹ for instance the well-known “Contact Singapore.”² Since the 1990s, many more foreign talent-related policy measures have come into existence.

Put in simple terms, Singapore operates a bifurcated foreign manpower management system (Low, 2002b; Teng & Wu, 2007; Wong, 1997; Yeoh, 2006). Both talented/skilled and semi-/low-skilled migrants are received in large numbers, but these groups are treated in radically different ways. The semi- or low-skilled migrants, such as construction workers, domestic helpers and other low-level service personnel or laborers, hold “Work Permits.”³ They are not eligible for long-term residency in Singapore and typically must leave after a few years of work (Yeoh, 2004, p. 2439). In contrast, migrant professionals and technicians hold the “Employment Pass (EP)”⁴ and the “S Pass.”⁵ They generally face more promising prospects in applying for Permanent Residency (PR) and eventually citizenship. As noted in the Introduction, much of the population growth in the past two decades or so in Singapore has been due to immigration and naturalization rather than organic growth. The number of PRs in Singapore increased from 112,100 in 1990 to a recent high point of 541,000 in 2010 (Yeoh, 2013, p. 101). Of the 1.37 million non-residents working in Singapore in 2015, which account for more than 38 % of the city-state’s total

workforce, over 25 % fall under the “talent” category (“Foreign Workforce Numbers,” 2015).⁶

In 2007, a Personalized Employment Pass (PEP) scheme was further introduced to allow high-earning foreigners in Singapore to switch jobs without having to apply for another EP and remain in Singapore for up to six months between jobs.⁷ Until its discontinuation in December 2011, an Employment Pass Eligibility Certificate (EPEC) scheme allowed foreign job-seekers who were eligible for EP-level employment but who were not already in Singapore to enter the country and stay for up to one year to seek employment (Yeoh, 2013, p. 113). Between 2008 and 2013, an Overseas Talent Recruitment scheme provided tax deductions for expenses incurred by employers in recruiting and relocating foreign talent (Yahya & Kaur, 2010, p. 27).

In addition to these visa schemes aiming at facilitating the employment of skilled foreign professionals, there are also programs designed to clear the path for foreign entrepreneurs hoping to set up business ventures in Singapore, such as the EntrePass⁸ and the Global Investor Program.⁹ Such investment-friendly programs, together with a favorable tax regime and the city’s high quality of living, attracted some super-rich to settle in Singapore, notably among them the Facebook co-founder Eduardo Saverin. Such globally-acclaimed Chinese entertainers as Gong Li and Jet Li have also chosen the Singapore passport. In short, for foreign professionals, entrepreneurs and the well-to-do, Singapore has created a very favorable immigration policy environment.

FOREIGN TALENT STUDENTS AND SCHOLARS

International students make up another major category of foreign talent targeted by Singapore. In 2002, a “Global Schoolhouse” project was launched by the government, with the ambitious objectives of attracting ten world-class universities to set up branch campuses or collaborative programs in Singapore through which to recruit a critical mass of up to 150,000 foreign students by 2015 (Christensen, 2012; Ho & Ge, 2011; Ng & Tan, 2010; Olds, 2007; Waring, 2013). Then-Deputy Prime Minister (now the President of the Republic of Singapore), Tony Tan stated that the Global Schoolhouse Project was meant to become “an engine for talent attraction in Singapore” (Wee, 2010, p. 142). The Project galvanized both the public and private education sectors. Although as of today the target of 150,000 has not materialized and is no longer

stressed by the government given the macro-context, Singapore remains a center of regional educational mobility. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, some 90,000 international students studied in Singapore, 40,000 of them as undergraduates (Waring, 2013, pp. 6–7). Many of these students will likely seek professional employment and resident status in Singapore after completing their studies.

In the 1990s, before Singapore became a regional and global magnet for international students, scholarship programs were already put in place to attract high-caliber “scholars” from Asian developing countries. These can be further divided into pre-tertiary level scholarships and tertiary/university level scholarships. The pre-tertiary scholarships began in the mid-1990s (Ho & Ge, 2011, p. 269), and in the main comprised two scholarship schemes: the ASEAN Scholarship, which targets secondary level students from the nine other ASEAN countries,¹⁰ and the “SM1” (also known as “JM3”) Scholarship targeting secondary school students from China. (“SM” stands for *senior middle* whereas “JM” stands for *junior middle*; see details further below.) Interestingly, despite the many striking similarities between these two programs in terms of the eligibility criteria as well as the terms and conditions,¹¹ only the ASEAN scholarship appears on the website of the Singaporean Ministry of Education (MOE), whereas virtually no *official* information can be found about the SM1 program on the internet. The most plausible explanation for this is that, because the responsibilities of recruiting and managing SM1 scholars are significantly borne by the Singaporean schools themselves, SM1 is essentially regarded as a “school-based scholarship” instead of an “MOE scholarship.” It may also be added that, given the recent local disquiet about the perceived privileges given to international students (Yang, 2014a, 2014b), there is little incentive for the Singapore government to create unnecessary publicity.

In any case, concerning both the ASEAN and SM1 scholarships, basic information such as numbers of scholars and costs associated with the awards remain largely inaccessible to the general public. It was only in response to questions raised by a Member of Parliament (MP) in 2012 that some information was disclosed: for the past ten years (i.e. 2003–2012), annually about 800 pre-tertiary level international students were offered full scholarships each worth about S\$14,000 per year (Ministry of Education, 2012). However, it remains unclear if this figure of 800 included all pre-tertiary international scholars, or whether it was the number of non-ASEAN scholars, because the latter was what the MP specifically asked for (ibid.). If the number 800

excluded the ASEAN scholars, it is likely that a majority of the figure was made up of scholars from China.

During the 1990s, government-linked scholarship programs for undergraduate foreign students also came into being (see also Koh, 2012, pp. 198–199). There can be relatively little doubt that these scholarships mainly targeted students from the PRC. The MOE disclosure mentioned above revealed that annually about 900 undergraduate-level international students were offered awards each worth between S\$18,000 and S\$25,000 (Ministry of Education, 2012). As I examine in detail below, the two PRC undergraduate scholarship schemes, “SM2” and “SM3,” in all probability account for the lion’s share of this 900 annual cohort.

PRC SCHOLARSHIP SCHEMES: SM1, SM2, SM3

An additional background to the emergence of the PRC scholarship programs, apart from the general “foreign talent” rationale, has been the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Singapore in 1990. According to the [Education Office of the PRC Embassy in Singapore \(n.d.\)](#), Chinese students began arriving in Singapore on the latter’s government scholarship programs in 1992 (first under what would subsequently be known as the SM3 program), although it was not until later in the decade and early 2000s that these programs were given more formal status through the signing of various memorandums between the two countries’ Ministries of Education. Next, I take a closer look at the three PRC scholarship schemes. The scholars recruited for these programs are the protagonists for the rest of this book.

SM1

The SM1 scheme commenced around 1995 (*ibid.*), and it targets Chinese students aged about 15, who have just completed junior middle school and are about to start senior middle school (thus SM1 is also known as JM3). In other words, typically, an SM1 scholar has completed nine years of schooling in China before coming to Singapore.

As mentioned earlier, the status of the SM1 program can be viewed as semi-governmental, because the Singaporean schools take the lead in the operation. Currently, it seems some 30 Singaporean secondary schools have SM1 programs,¹² but in the early years this number must have been fewer. These Singaporean schools established relationships

with their feeder schools in China initially through the facilitation of the Singaporean and Chinese MOEs, but subsequently school-level co-operations and exchanges continued and deepened. Each school recruits up to a few dozen students from their Chinese feeder schools every year, and each Singaporean school typically has multiple feeder schools located in different Chinese provinces and cities. The feeder schools are usually top-ranking ones in their respective locality, and scholars are chosen from among the academically outstanding students in these schools. Students can volunteer to apply, but may be subject to their schools' recommendation or selection. They then undergo written tests and interviews conducted by the Singaporean school officials and teachers who visit China each year specifically for the purpose of scholar selection.

While previously I have given a relatively modest estimate of the annual SM1 cohort size at 200 (Yang, 2014b), there are reasons to believe that the numbers in recent years have been greater. [The Education Office of PRC Embassy in Singapore \(n.d.\)](#) suggested that since the 2001 signing of relevant memorandums, the numbers of JM3 and SM2 scholars add up to 1200–1500 per annum. Since the numbers of SM2 scholars could be reliably established to be within the 200–400 range for the decade since 2001 (see Chapter 3, Table 3.1), this seems to mean that possibly as many as 800 SM1 scholars have been recruited every year. But this would not only mean that virtually all pre-tertiary scholarships in Singapore go to students from China, but is also based on the assumption that the Singaporean MOE's 2012 disclosure of the figure of 800 pre-tertiary scholarship awards was to the exclusion of ASEAN scholars. Lacking verification of these facts, I estimate the annual number of SM1 scholarship awards at 400.

Once in Singapore, SM1 scholars join the third year of the four-year local secondary school education system. Upon taking "O Level" exams at the end of secondary school, they typically proceed to local junior colleges to study for two years toward the "A Level" exams. Some SM1-receiving Singaporean schools operate "integrated programs" (IP) that make the "O Level" exam redundant, in which case, the SM1 scholars stay in the same institution until they obtain the "A Level" certificate or equivalent qualification. During their four-year scholarship tenure, the SM1 scholars are exempted from all tuition fees and are provided free accommodation and catering, either at hostels specially arranged for them or in the dormitories of the schools they attend. According to an SM1 scholar informant who came to Singapore in 2003, during his four-year scholarship tenure, scholars also received a S\$200 monthly allowance. While SM1 scholars

are often accommodated separately from local students, in school, they mingle with local students, because the number of SM1 scholars in each school or junior college is typically very small.

Perhaps the most generous feature about the SM1 scholarship (the same applies to ASEAN scholarship) is the fact that it does not carry any “bond.” In other words, SM1 scholars are free to leave or stay in Singapore to pursue whatever future they see fit. For SM1 scholars from wealthy families, this means they could use the “A Level” or equivalent qualifications obtained in Singapore as a stepping stone for places in top Western universities, typically those located in the USA or the UK. Based on my interactions with former SM1 scholars in Singapore, it seems the majority of them come from urban middle-class family backgrounds. No doubt, some are sufficiently affluent to afford an undergraduate education at elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge.

According to an SM1 scholar informant, most SM1 scholars harbor ambitions to attend world-class universities in either the UK or North America, and many of them achieve strong enough “A Level” results to qualify for such institutions. The only obstacle remains financial means—SM1 scholars who remain in Singapore for higher education do so typically out of pragmatic consideration, since the Singapore government offers a blanket grant (“Tuition Grant”) applicable to all students in local higher education which covers a large part of the tuition fees.¹³ Another privilege associated with the SM1 scholarship is that scholars are usually eligible for Permanent Residency (PR) status in Singapore upon successful completion of the scholarship tenure. This offer is usually taken up by female scholars no matter whether they intend to stay in Singapore in the long run; on the contrary, virtually no male scholar would take it, because for them it would make compulsory the two-year National Service in the military before they can matriculate at university.

SM2 and SM3

SM2 and SM3 are both essentially undergraduate scholarships, and there are notable similarities between them. Because Chapter 3 is dedicated to the SM2 scheme, my introduction here is brief, and focused on SM3.

The SM3 scheme commenced in 1992, and initially the annual cohort size was said to be about 200 ([Education Office of PRC Embassy in Singapore, n.d.](#)). The program was terminated after the twentieth batch came to Singapore in 2011. SM3 scholars were recruited from among

Table 2.1 Singapore government sponsored “PRC scholarships” (Based on author’s fieldwork)

<i>Singapore government-sponsored PRC scholarship Schemes</i>	<i>Operating years</i>	<i>Sources of scholars</i>	<i>Phase (in China) at which scholars are recruited</i>	<i>Yearly intake</i>	<i>Full scholarship duration</i>	<i>Singapore participating education institutions</i>	<i>Bond</i>
SM1	Mid-1990s present	Top junior middle schools in various Chinese provinces	End of junior middle school	(approx.) 400	Secondary 3 to end of Junior College (JC)	Approximately 30 secondary schools, ^a JC depending on scholars’ own choices/applications	NA
SM2	1997–present	Top senior middle schools in various Chinese provinces	Senior middle school Year Two	200–400	18 months “bridging course” and Undergraduate	NUS NTU (since 2011 also SUTD)	6 years ^b
SM3	1992–2011	Approximately 20 highly ranked Chinese universities ^c	University Year One	(approx.) 200–400	6 months “bridging course” and Undergraduate	NUS NTU (since 2011 also SUTD)	6 years

Notes

^aA list of Singapore’s SM1 participating schools, dated in May 2011, is provided on the following webpage based in China: <http://baike.baidu.com/item/sml> (last accessed 21 November 2015).

^bThe six years is to be understood as three additional years plus the three-year bond attached to all recipients of the Singapore government “tuition grant”

^cSee <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%B8%AD%E6%96%B0%E5%A5%96%E5%AD%A6%E9%87%91%E9%A1%B9%E7%9B%AE> (last accessed 21 November 2015).

first-year students in a pool of some twenty highly ranked Chinese universities.¹⁴ MOE officials and university representatives from Singapore travel to these feeder universities in China to conduct selection exams and interviews to pick the scholars. While I have not been able to obtain reliable statistics about the intake scale of SM3 throughout the years, fragmentary evidence suggests that there were between 300 and 400 scholars in each of the final few cohorts.

Upon arrival in Singapore—typically in November or December each year—the SM3 scholars undergo a six-month intensive “bridging course” designed to help improve their English level and prepare them for university. There have been different arrangements pertaining to the scholars’ accommodation during the “bridging course” over the years. Early on, scholars were housed in the dormitories of local educational establishments, which the MOE secured for them. In later cohorts, scholars were allowed to move directly into their university residential halls. In the latter case, even though they were distributed more or less evenly across different campus dormitories, because they attended bridging programs together, contact with other students in the campus was limited. On the whole, the SM3 scholars spent the “bridging course” in a rather closely-knit circle. During the undergraduate period, scholars were provided a monthly living stipend of S\$500, exempted from all tuition and examination fees, and were heavily subsidized for accommodation.

The SM2 scheme commenced in 1997, and hearsay from fieldwork suggested that it was extended for five more years after the 15th batch was recruited in 2011, thus extending the program to at least 2016. It is similar to the SM3 scheme in many respects, except that eligible candidates are second-year senior middle school (thus “SM2”) students from more than a dozen Chinese provinces. The number of eligible Chinese provinces increased over time, and the annual intake scale increased from 100–200 in the earlier years to 300–400 in more recent years. Upon arrival in Singapore, SM2 scholars typically undergo an 18-month “bridging course,” though more recently changes have been made to the “bridging course” arrangements (see Chapter 3).

Again, absent authoritative statistics, I estimate that the SM2 and SM3 schemes, in combination, have so far brought as many as 15,000 PRC students into Singapore. In contrast to the SM1 scheme, however, both SM2 and SM3 have certain strings attached. Scholars are only allowed to specialize in engineering or science majors at university. Indeed, the scholarship selection exams they undergo in China strongly emphasize

mathematics and science. Of late, various double major or double degree programs have sprung up in Singaporean universities, and SM2/3 scholars have been allowed to enroll in some such programs, although anything related to medicine, law, the social sciences, humanities and arts remain off-limits. More importantly, both scholarships carry a legal “bond” requiring the scholar to work in Singapore for a total of six years upon finishing their undergraduate degree (Table 2.1).

RECRUITING GROUND: THE CHINESE MIDDLE SCHOOL MILIEU

Having provided the Singaporean context above, I now turn to the Chinese context, namely, the Chinese middle school as the recruiting ground of the Singaporean scholarship programs. A shared middle school experience is deeply influential, often definitive, in shaping contemporary Chinese students as subjects embodying certain educational desires. Thus, to appreciate the PRC scholars’ subsequent encounters and experiences in Singapore as described in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, it is necessary and important first to understand the Chinese middle school milieu and the kind of subjectivities it produces. Here, to convey this milieu, I present and analyze a symbolically rich school event—a speech contest—that I recorded ethnographically at School A during the China leg of my fieldwork. Although this event itself bears no direct relation to the Singapore foreign talent scholar recruitment, School A is the same school where I carried out interviews and group discussions with the 15th batch SM2 candidates in Jiangxi in 2011. In other words, the ethnographic sketch below and my analyses of it pertain precisely to the Chinese middle school milieu from which the scholars are selected.

SCHOOL A

Located in Jiangxi’s provincial seat Nanchang, School A is a public middle school affiliated to Jiangxi Province’s Teachers College. Measured in terms of its success in sending students to high-ranking Chinese universities, School A has long been among the top schools in the province. As such, School A may be viewed as representative of the many top public middle schools across China that supply Singapore with foreign talent scholars. More broadly, School A is fairly representative of Chinese middle school education too. School A consists of a junior middle section (grades

7–9) and a senior middle section (grades 10–12). As of 2009, there were 71 home classes across these six grades, in which over 4100 students were educated and supported by more than 300 academic and administrative staff members. As a school reputed for its academic excellence, School A draws the most academically capable students from Nanchang City and a small number of top students from across Jiangxi Province. In the 2010 national University Entrance Exam (UEE), or *Gaokao*, 22 students from School A gained admissions to Tsinghua and Peking Universities—the two most prestigious and competitive institutions in China. This number must be seen in light of the fact that China’s socialist planning legacy dictates that top national universities only have very limited admission quotas for the provinces. For example, in 2009, Peking and Tsinghua Universities had a combined admission quota of just 66 in Jiangxi; in 2012, this number was slightly higher at 84. This means the senior middle section of School A manages to produce a quarter to a third of all Peking/Tsinghua-admitted students in a province of 45 million people where 438 senior middle schools prepared 251,060 students for the UEE.¹⁵

ETHNOGRAPHIC SKETCH: A SPEECH CONTEST

[A Friday afternoon, May 2011] In School A’s large function hall, the entire cohorts of Grades 9 and 10 are gathering. Students bring their stools from their classrooms, and settle into neat blocks. On the raised stage in front, microphones are prepared. The emcee, herself a student, is about to kick off the annual school Speech Contest (*yanjiang bisai*), with this year’s theme being “I Love Reading” (*wo ai dushu*). One by one, sixteen contestants each takes the stage and gives a five-minute speech in Mandarin Chinese. Several are well prepared and perform fairly well; most are evidently nervous, now speaking with a trembling voice, now repeating the previous sentence to cover up the fact that he/she has forgotten the next, and now getting stuck completely, desperately trying to recall memorized scripts while holding back tears.

One contestant tells an often-repeated parable in the Chinese school literary education repertoire: a person walks on a mountain road after sunset and hears a mysterious voice instructing him to pick up some pebbles from the ground. Baffled and suspicious, he picks up several, only to find at dawn that those pebbles were actually gold, leaving him to regret not heeding the voice and picking up more. The moral is, as the contestant reveals in her coda, that the pebbles are just like book-reading, and one ought to read more while

still young because one tends to realize the importance of reading too late. Most contestants tell similar parables and use emotionally charged tones, voices and body languages to deliver such edifying messages, “Oh, how I love reading! Reading is the purest and noblest of pursuits!” “Reading is the fount of wisdom, the sweet dew that nourishes the soul!” “We must read, just like Premier Zhou Enlai who vowed to read for China’s revitalization!”¹⁶ The exaggerated effusiveness of several contestants probably made me roll my eyes a little, and yet, at the same time, I could not help noticing the glaring fault lines in the performances. Nearly all contestants at some point got nervous and forgot a few lines; they alternated between fiery grandiloquence one moment and blankness, silence, and embarrassment the next.

Off the stage, the audience—the contestants’ classmates—respond variously to the whole occasion. Some have brought their homework or English vocabulary booklet with them, beavering away without even raising their heads for a moment. (Attending the speech contest was mandatory; otherwise, they would have preferred remaining in their classrooms to study.) Some pay only sporadic attention amidst general nonchalance; a small number seem more engaged.

When one contestant got stuck and couldn’t speak for nearly a minute, loud applause of encouragement erupted from the floor. Yet when another contestant in her interactive speech asked the audience, “Can you now all hear the most beautiful melody of the sound of reading books?,” the “yes”s voiced by a small number of students were drowned in jeering “no!”s coming from the majority who sabotaged her plan. Yet another contestant ended her speech with a totally unexpected gesture, inviting (rather obligingly!) all students in the hall to stand up, with clenched fist over the shoulder, to say out loud a pledge that she had prepared: “Let reading become an inalienable part of our lives, and use the knowledge we learned to perfect ourselves and build our great nation!” The audience indeed rose up (so did I!) to make the pledge (this I didn’t!), though I could sense the grudge and hear many murmur complaints: “what the hell is this again?”

When the whole affair was done and students filed out of the function hall, I asked a student, with whom I have had already some interactions by then, whether he felt some of the emotionality and high-sound rhetoric were “faked” (*jia*). The student, obviously aghast at my incredible naivety, replied, “Of course it’s fake! It’s a show (*biaoyan*)! It’s called a speech (*yan jiang*) for a reason!” [*yan* in Chinese means “to perform/act”] (based on author’s fieldnotes)

This speech-making event captures the ways in which schooling shapes the educational desire of contemporary Chinese students. Specifically, as I argue below, Chinese educational desire is shaped according to two logics simultaneously, one involving an idealized normalization emphasizing virtues and values, the other being a pragmatic attitude stressing extrinsic utilities and outcomes. These two broad ways of conditioning educational desire—the normative and idealized on the one hand and the pragmatic and instrumental on the other—co-exist in tension and produce a somewhat conflicted educational subjectivity in the Chinese school students.

Normalizing Educational Desires

Although more than three decades has passed since China entered the reform era, the kinds of moral pedagogies that invoke legacies of high socialism as well as pre-socialist Chinese traditions still seem to permeate the education system. Stig Thøgersen (1990) points out that moral education in Chinese schools can be seen as a combination of traditional Confucian values, patriotism and socialist principles, just as Nie (2008, p. 7) more recently also notes that “politics, ideology, and morality have remained the major elements of moral education in China.” Given that moral education in a broad sense is universal and implicit in any education system, a meaningful analysis of moral education must seek to pin down the specific and contingent characters of a particular educational regime. One key feature of moral education in contemporary Chinese schools is the high degree to which it is still ideologically driven, by which I mean not only that ideologies still take center stage in the moral pedagogical substance, but also the fact that ideology’s better half—*rhetoric* (Chylińska, 2009; Mariner, 1971)—plays a notable role.

The schema of moral education in the Chinese school can be seen as composed of four intersecting and often mutually reinforcing layers or strands. The most general and basic layer involves what may be regarded as universal moral sentiments and principles that apply to most human societies, such as rules like thou shall not steal. However, beyond this universal layer, moral education in Chinese schools becomes socially and culturally specific. The second major strand consists in the Confucian value system that emphasizes culture-specific virtues and moral ideals. The third strand is that of nationalist and patriotic education, which aims to mold students into national subjects who share a pride in the nation and embody patriotic sentiments. The fourth and final major strand pertains to the official

political ideologies of the Chinese state, namely, Marxist/Communist/Socialist principles in their indigenized Chinese versions. In addition, this political ideological strand also involves educating students to develop loyalty toward the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its policies.

The ethnographic sketch of the “I Love Reading” speech contest at School A encapsulates all these four strands of moral education, showcasing how the students’ educational desire—symbolized in this specific case as the desire and love for reading—is normalized. First of all, the exhortation to dedicate one’s youth to reading can be interpreted at the general level as stressing the universal virtue of conscientiousness and industry. However, this general exhortation is already inextricably bound up with the Confucian ideologies and imaginaries that run deep in Chinese society, because conscientiousness and industry need not be associated with the pursuit of bookish studies or intellectual activities but may be manifested in physical labor, trades or entrepreneurial activities. However, in the Confucian moral universe of agrarian-imperial China, literary pursuits are held in the highest symbolic esteem; therefore, the most honorable form of industriousness is scholarly industriousness.¹⁷ Furthermore, the civil service examination system of imperial China meant that scholarly pursuit has been historically linked to worldly success, because imperial bureaucrats were selected on the basis of their mastery of the Confucian canons. Thus, the parable about pebbles turning into gold rehearses this very specifically Confucian-imperial way of defining and governing educational desire.

The nationalistic/patriotic strand and the party-state ideological strand in Chinese school moral education are almost always intertwined, where the CCP state is glorified as the savior of the Chinese nation, while the love for and pride in the Chinese nation are tied in with the legitimacy of the CCP regime. This political-ideological dimension of the moral education was explicit in the speech contest where contestants touted the love for study/reading as a way to serve the nation. In one particular instance, the Communist veteran leader Zhou Enlai’s own act of dedicating study/reading as a service to the nation was meant to be an edifying example for contemporary Chinese students to aspire to.

The stylistic aspect of the speech contest as a pedagogical performance also reveals an important feature of the normative conditioning of educational desire. As Kipnis (2011a, pp. 104–5) has also observed, in Chinese schools, moral training is believed to result from the emotional embodiment of moralizing messages. He points out that, as many of the moralizing messages “can be quite maudlin, depicting, for example, the sacrifices that parents make for their children or that soldiers and Party members make for the nation. There is plenty of room for emotive display

through facial expression and tone of voice.” As Bénéï’s (2008) work in the Indian schooling context similarly argues, visceral, bodily trainings are often more effective than mere abstract intellectual or ideational indoctrination in shaping and channeling students’ aspirations and longings toward the lofty virtues and ideals sanctioned by the state.

On appearance, the School A contestants’ somewhat contrived performance and the audience’s mixed response seem to suggest that this ideological normalization of educational desire fails to get a grip on the students. While School A students did not quite treat the speech contest experience as a sheer joke, their reactions demonstrate how the ideology disguised as moral education in Chinese schools fails to engage students the way it is intended to. Scholars (e.g. Kipnis, 2011a; Nie, 2008) agree that the party-state related ideological indoctrinations fail most conspicuously due to the drastic discrepancies and contradictions between the propaganda and the social realities that are apparent to most students (Nie, 2008).

While acknowledging this, however, I maintain that the subtle and subconscious effects of the ideological conditioning of educational desire must not be underestimated. While the party-state related indoctrination may not work very effectively, it could be a different case with the less politicized cultural ideological conditioning. Furthermore, as Kipnis (2011a, p. 112) also points out: “even when official pedagogic narratives produce nothing but cynicism, it is a form of cynicism that is widely shared throughout the nation,” thanks to the extraordinarily high level of political and administrative centralization in China. Invoking cultural anthropologist Michael Herzfeld’s (2005) idea of “cultural intimacy,” Kipnis highlights the ambiguity and possible oscillation between cynicism and disbelief on the one hand and identification and internalization on the other. In any event, it is unlikely that years of ideologized normalization of moral sentiments and rhetorical training of desires should have not some lasting effects on the students. Especially in those areas of moral education which are not seen or experienced as severely contradicted by reality, the educability of desires of the students ought to be acknowledged. Vanessa Fong (2004) notices, for instance, how China’s singleton generation youths who grew up post-1980s harbor toward their motherland China a “filial nationalism” that seems to be a fusion between the Confucian filial piety and a patriotic sentiment toward the country. As shall become more apparent in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, the ideologically educated desires of the Chinese students, which emphasize lofty ideas, virtues, and idealism, can have notable implications for the ways in which Chinese students experience education in Singapore.

Pragmatist and Instrumentalist Educational Desire

At the same time, the School A speech contest reveals how a pragmatic conditioning of educational desire influences students to adopt an instrumentalist attitude toward education, stressing the extrinsic rewards or the extrinsic motivations for educational pursuits. In this regard, the threadbare parable about pebbles turning into gold invoked by one contestant revealed how the scholarly desire prevalent under Confucian-imperial China served to bind together an idealistic scholasticism and a worldly instrumentalism.

The speech contest can be viewed essentially as an exam. Contestants who wish to do well in it find themselves expected to reproduce “correct” answers. Here, specifically, the acceptable responses involve both the ideological normative content and an approved style of delivery of the speech. The contestants are judged by a panel of teachers, who evaluate them against these standards and assign them scores according to the degrees to which they conform.

The ways in which various contestants faltered at giving a satisfactory performance (e.g. forgetting lines; stuttering; etc.) suggest that the contest is experienced as alienating, as an imposition, much like an exam. The conversation I had with a student in the audience after the event was most revealing: a speech contest was just a show, and naturally it required “faking.” This “faking” was necessary because the expectations of the contest, both substantive and stylistic, do not reflect the concerns or interests of the contestants. But if so, then why did the students even bother to participate in the speech contest in the first place? When I asked the contestants, most replied that they wanted a “challenge” (*tiaozhan*) or “experience” (*duanlian*)—in other words, a challenge and an experience in doing something that might not intrinsically make sense to them, but that was nevertheless rewarding extrinsically, in terms of embellishing their CVs, for example. This willingness to take on an arbitrary pedagogical/educational task, not for its intrinsic value or interest, but for its extrinsic utilities, is what I mean by the pragmatist and instrumentalist logic of educational desire.

The point I hope to make here is simple: the speech contest event is school education writ small. In other words, school education is analogous, indeed homological, with the logics of the speech contest. It also involves students learning things that are, in many ways “arbitrary”—not so much in the sense that the knowledge being taught is wrong or arbitrary, but in the sense that what is considered worth knowing always involves some arbitrariness, contingency, and politics. Despite so, outcomes based on

examining students on such arbitrary and contingent knowledge nevertheless determine their educational progression, their subsequent socio-economic status, and possibly their life trajectories altogether. Given such high extrinsic stakes associated with schooling, educational achievement is intensely desired, sometimes with little regard to educational content, much as the speech contest participants took trouble to “fake” what was expected of them even though those expectations may not interest them intrinsically. In short, the pragmatist and instrumentalist educational desire drives students to care less about what they study than how well they study what is foisted upon them.

Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference between the speech contest and school education. While students may have the option of ignoring the speech contest, they have much less of an option regarding school education in general. This point is beautifully illustrated in the fact that many School A students I observed in that function hall on that Friday afternoon paid scant attention to what happened on the stage but instead devoted this time—only one hour or so on a Friday afternoon—to their all-important studies. This pragmatic educational desire, characterized by an instrumentalism antithetical to the ideological values and idealism described previously, is also a key component to the subjectivity of Chinese middle school students.

* * *

After having addressed both the Singaporean foreign scholars programs and the Chinese educational milieu, I move now to Chapter 3. There I explore the intersection between Singapore’s desire for foreign talent scholars and the Chinese students’ educational desire in the case of the SM2 program’s recruitment process in Jiangxi in 2011.

NOTES

1. It is infeasible and unnecessary to trace the trajectories of such organizational developments, but the following fragmentary information as found in existing literature can be illustrative. For instance, an International Manpower Division was set up in 1991 within the Economic Development Board (EDB), “which effectively meant that the Board’s role of attracting overseas investment to Singapore had been supplemented with the added function of attracting skilled manpower” (Ho & Ge, 2011, p. 268). In 1998, The Committee on Singapore Talent and Recruitment (STAR) was formed, “mandated to develop and implement strategies to attract and retain foreign talent to make Singapore a hub for international talent while

- remaining socially cohesive” (Low, 2002, p. 415). At present, at the highest level, a National Population and Talent Division, which is a ministry-level department of the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, oversees strategic policymaking in relation to population and talent development in the city-state.
2. See <http://www.contactsingapore.sg/Contact> Singapore operates under the International Manpower Division (IMD), the Ministry of Manpower (MOM). With twelve branch offices spread across five continents, Contact Singapore’s sole mission is to promote Singapore as a land of career and business opportunities to talent around world.
 3. Ministry of Manpower, Singapore: <http://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-worker>; (last accessed 27 September 2015).
 4. Ministry of Manpower, Singapore: <http://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/employment-pass>; (last accessed 27 September 2015).
 5. Ministry of Manpower, Singapore <http://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/s-pass>; (last accessed 27 September 2015).
 6. Following Yeoh and Lin (2013, p. 36), “talent” here is defined as those holding the “Employment Pass” (EP) and the “S Pass.”
 7. Ministry of Manpower, Singapore <http://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/personalised-employment-pass>; (last accessed 27 September, 2015).
 8. Ministry of Manpower, Singapore, <http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/passes-visas/entrepass/before-you-apply/Pages/default.aspx> (last accessed 8 April, 2014).
 9. See Contact Singapore, https://www.contactsingapore.sg/investors_business_owners/invest_in_singapore/global_investor_programme (last accessed 8 April, 2014).
 10. See Ministry of Education, Singapore. <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/scholarships/asean> (last accessed 27 September 2015).
 11. For a blog which contains a Malaysian ASEAN scholar’s account of his/her experience, see <http://aseanscholarstory.blogspot.sg/> (last accessed 27 September 2015). Comparing this with my subsequent account on the SM1 PRC scholarship reveals so many similarities between these two programs that they might well be regarded as equivalent programs for two different source regions.
 12. One entry in Baidu Encyclopaedia—China’s equivalent of Wikipedia—contains a list of these SM1/JM3 participating schools: <http://baike.baidu.com/item/sm1>; (last accessed 28 September 2015).
 13. See Ministry of Education, Singapore. <https://tgonline.moe.gov.sg/tgis/normal/index.action> (last accessed 15 April 2013).
 14. For example, the 2006 cohort of SM3 scholars were said to have been selected from the following institutions: Beihang University, Chongqing University, Dalian Science and Technology University, Southeast University, Harbin Institute of Technology, Jilin University, Nanjing

- University, Shandong University, Sichuang University, Wuhan University, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Zhejiang University, and Zhongnan University.
15. From the website of Jiangxi Education Bureau. <http://www.jxedu.gov.cn/jytj/2011jytj/2012/04/20120420032442400.html> (last accessed 28 September 2015).
 16. It is said that the Chinese Communist Party revolutionary veteran and first Premier Zhou Enlai vowed to study for the purpose of China's "revitalization" when he was young ("wei zhonghua jueqi er dushu").
 17. Given that China was a patriarchal society, this statement only applied to men. Indeed, women were thought to be virtuous if they were not educated or talented; as the old adage went: a woman is virtuous who has no talent (*nüzi wucai bianshi de*).

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Selecting Scholars for Singapore: The SM2 Program

Abstract This chapter uses the case of the “SM2” scheme to illustrate how Singapore recruits foreign talent students. Installed in 1997, the SM2 program is one of the three long-running PRC scholarships that have been channeling Chinese students to Singapore. It annually provides 200–400 teenage senior middle-school students full undergraduate scholarships with living stipends, and in return legally obligates the scholarship-recipients to work in Singapore for six years after obtaining their degree. After a general overview of the SM2 program, this chapter provides a first-hand ethnographic account of the 15th batch SM2 recruitment in 2011 in the southern Chinese province of Jiangxi. It offers unique and rare insights into the ways in which this Singaporean scholarship scheme is perceived and received by its Chinese targets.

Keywords SM2 scholarship • Recruitment • China • Jiangxi • Nanchang • Ethnography

In the previous chapter, I introduced the “SM1/2/3” scholarship schemes. For reasons of practicality, in the research fieldwork I had to choose to focus on one of these schemes, and I chose the SM2 program. In this chapter, I offer a detailed look at the SM2 program, covering its history, facts and statistics insofar as these could be obtained or reconstructed.

Based on first-hand ethnographic work, I also furnish a close-up account of the 15th batch SM2 recruitment process in Jiangxi Province, which took place between March and May 2011.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SM2 PROGRAM

Facts and Statistics

It has been rumored that the SM2 program was based on an agreement sealed at some point in the 1990s between then-Chinese Premier Li Peng and Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Although it is impossible to verify this, I do recall the SM2 program being described by officials from the Ministry of Education (MOE) Singapore as “an outcome of the strategic visions of the very top-level leaders of the two countries.” What can be reliably deduced, however, is that the program started in 1997. After the recruitment of the 15th batch in 2011, the program was extended for another five years. It is not known at the time of publication if the program will be extended beyond 2016.

Technically speaking, SM2 is a program managed by the Singaporean MOE on behalf of several prominent government-linked corporations (GLCs) in Singapore, which provide the actual funding for the scholars’ tuition and living expenses. For example, in the case of the sixth batch recruited in 2002, these GLCs included: Development Bank of Singapore (DBS), Keppel Corporation, Neptune Orient Line (NOL), Sembcorp, Singapore Airlines (SIA), PSA International and SingTel. In legal terms, an individual scholar receives their scholarship from a specific GLC, toward which they then owe corresponding obligations (the “bond”). In operational terms, however, apart from legal documentation, these GLCs never come into the picture in the scholars’ experiences. The GLCs reserve the right to demand the scholars they have funded to work for them or to pursue legal damages when contractual violations occur. Rarely are these rights exercised, if at all. It would not be unfair to suggest that these corporations are only involved nominally. In effect, the Singaporean MOE manages the program and implements all the relevant procedures.

In brief, the SM2 program offers full scholarships at Singaporean universities to Chinese senior middle school year-two students across different provinces for undergraduate studies in engineering and science disciplines. In return, the scholars consent to work in Singapore for a period of six years after graduation. Since the program’s commencement, the core terms and conditions have remained the same, save for some minor adjustments. The scholars are entitled to the following benefits during their scholarship tenure:

- A one-way airfare from the scholar's hometown to Singapore at the commencement of the program, and a return airfare between Singapore and China upon completion of undergraduate education;
- A living allowance of 6000 Singapore dollars (S\$) per annum until the scholar's completion of the normal course of university education;
- A one-off settlement allowance of S\$200 upon initial arrival in Singapore;
- All tuition and examination fees paid;
- Basic medical and personal accidents insurances; and
- Accommodation fees waived or heavily subsidized throughout the study period.

The obligations of the scholars, in detail, are:

- To major in science and/or engineering disciplines approved by MOE in either the National University of Singapore (NUS) or Nanyang Technological University (NTU); (starting from the 15th batch in 2011, the then newly established Singapore University of Technology and Design, SUTD, was added onto the eligible destinations for scholars from Sichuan, Jiangsu, Hebei, and Shandong Provinces);
- Satisfying performances, academic and otherwise, over the entire scholarship period;
- Upon graduation, to complete six years of work in either the sponsoring GLCs or any Singapore-registered company or organization;
- From the 17th batch, 2013 onwards, SM2 scholars must also complete a total of 80 hours of work under a Community Involvement Program (CIP)—essentially contributions to charity or community services—during their four years of undergraduate studies (thus on average 20 hours of CIP per year).¹

Unsatisfactory academic performance or conduct during the scholarship tenure may result in the scholars receiving warning letters from the MOE; in more serious cases, they may have their scholarship terminated or be disqualified altogether and repatriated to China. Similarly, non-performance of the bond after graduation also amounts to a contractual violation. Upon such occasions, the sponsoring GLCs are legally entitled to demand financial damages from the scholars, though the exercise of such rights is discretionary. Deferment of the service obligation is possible, subject to the approval from the MOE or the relevant university authorities.

Although the terms and conditions of the scholarship have remained essentially the same, the scale of the program has grown significantly over the years, despite a slight decline most recently. Table 3.1 shows the

Table 3.1 Numbers of the 6th and 12th–19th batches of SM2 scholars from various Chinese provinces (*Sources: fieldwork*)

<i>Name of Chinese administrative region</i>	<i>6th (2002)</i>	<i>12th (2008)</i>	<i>13th (2009)</i>	<i>14th (2010)</i>	<i>15th (2011)</i>	<i>16th (2012)</i>	<i>17th (2013)</i>	<i>18th (2014)</i>	<i>19th (2015)</i>	<i>No. of high schools eligible for SM2 program in the region (12th batch onwards)</i>
Heilongjiang	19	20	19	20	18	18	17	12	14	7
Jilin	12	17	14	15	14	13	13	13	12	5
Liaoning	–	18	20	20	17	16	15	15	13	5
Tianjin	–	12	12	13	10	10	8	8	8	8
Hebei	36	37	37	35	31	31	30	24	25	10
Henan	–	15	15	15	13	13	11	11	11	6
Shandong	18	27	27	30	25	23	23	21	20	7
Shaanxi	9	16	15	21	18	12	11	11	12	5
Hunan	–	15	14	15	13	10	9	8	8	6
Chongqing	–	16	17	15	18	15	11	9	8	8
Sichuan	41	40	40	40	36	36	31	29	29	8
Hubei	17	21	25	20	18	17	16	16	14	6
Jiangsu	39	40	41	37	34	34	26	18	23	19
Anhui	–	16	15	14	13	6	7	9	6	8
Zhejiang	–	15	17	15	11	11	11	12	12	6
Jiangxi	15	15	15	15	13	14	13	11	11	5
Fujian	–	15	15	15	12	10	10	6	8	7
Guangdong	–	15	14	15	12	10	9	8	6	6
Hainan	–	6	5	4	–	–	–	–	–	4
<i>Total</i>	206	376	377	371	326	299	271	241	240	136

numbers of scholars and their places of origin in various years for which I could obtain reliable data.

The SM2 program consists of four stages.

The first is the pre-Singapore stage, namely, the invitation, application and selection processes in China. This stage usually lasts from March, when the selection begins, until November of the same year, when successful scholars embark for Singapore to start their SM2 journey.

The next is a so-called “bridging course” stage lasting normally 18 months, comprising intensive university level preparatory courses in English language skills, mathematics and the sciences (all taught in English), which are aimed to help the scholars adapt to an English-medium academic setting and the Singapore environment in general. This 18-month period is reduced to six months for scholars who are admitted to the “Accelerated Program” (AP) based on their exceptional academic performance at the beginning of the bridging course. For the 15th batch of 2011, SM2 scholars originating from seven provinces (Jiangsu, Shandong, Hebei, Sichuan, Zhejiang, Liaoning and Hubei) were asked to make the move to Singapore in July instead of November, in order to go through bridging programs lasting twelve months before university matriculation in August the following year. Beginning with the 16th batch, all SM2 scholars headed to Singapore in July and go through a 12-month bridging course; the AP program was also abolished.

The third stage is the four-year university undergraduate course, during which the scholars enroll as normal students and study like any other undergraduate. Since the scholars have already passed the selection exams set by the Singaporean MOE, their admission to the universities is automatic, provided they perform satisfactorily during the bridging course. Although scholars are asked to indicate their preferences prior to coming to Singapore, the Singaporean university to which they are assigned appears to be largely decided randomly by the MOE. Scholars are also asked to indicate which majors they wish to pursue, and admission decisions are made by the university schools or faculties that offer those majors.

Finally, upon graduation, scholars are faced with two options: to look for a job or to pursue further studies. Since further studies are not encouraged under the SM2 scheme, most scholars enter the job market. In fact, pursuing postgraduate education is a sensitive issue central to many scholars and their families’ concerns, which generates some tensions and doubts for the candidates at the invitation and selection stages in China, to which I now turn.

Recruitment

While acknowledging minor variations between different year cohorts and across different provinces, I can present a general picture of the recruitment process based on my first-hand observation of the 15th batch recruitment in Jiangxi as well as my many dialogues with scholars from various cohorts and provinces.

Typically in February or March, the Singaporean MOE sends out invitations for application to the local educational bureaus (*jiaoyu ting*) in the eligible Chinese provinces, entrusting them to pass on the invitation to the eligible schools. The application quotas are relatively modest and vary from province to province, ranging from over a hundred to less than fifty. Only second-year students at eligible senior middle schools can apply, and apart from good academic standing, a set of more subjective criteria is listed (Fig. 3.1). Because scholars are eventually expected to major in engineering and/or science disciplines in Singapore, the program predominantly attracts students from the science stream, though this need not always be the case.

Slight differences exist in the ways in which the provincial educational bureaus manage the application processes. On one extreme, the invitation

1. 品学兼优、身体健康、奉公守法
2. 心理素质高、适应能力强
3. 具备领导才能、交际才能
4. 能够自立、自理、自律、自强
5. 有正确的名利观、人生观、价值观

(English translation:

1. Excellent academic standing and character, good health, law-abidingness
2. Good psychological fitness, ability to adapt to new environments
3. Leadership skills and social skills
4. Independence, ability to look after yourself, self-discipline, self-motivation
5. Correct attitude toward fame and riches; correct outlook on life; correct values

Fig. 3.1 Eligibility criteria for SM2 applicants

may be made fully open and extended to as large a pool of potential applicants as possible in the province. In such cases, elimination exams are organized to determine which students are selected to sit for the written exams administered by the Singaporean MOE. On the other extreme, the provincial bureau may rely on recommendations from the eligible schools in place of a preliminary exam. The education bureau may simply assemble the candidate list based on recommendations from the eligible schools. Since the provincial education bureau controls the final list of applicants in that province to be submitted to MOE, they become the key gatekeeper in the whole process. Often, *guanxi*, the Chinese term for social capital or personal connections (Kipnis, 1997), comes into the picture, as it does in many aspects of Chinese social life. Parents with strong *guanxi* capital—local officials, resourceful business people or simply relatives or friends to the education bureau officials—may try to get the education bureau or the school leadership to enter their children's names directly into the schools' recommendation lists or the education bureau's candidate list. The preliminary elimination exam, thus becomes a way not only to distribute the limited SM2 opportunities more fairly and transparently but also to manage overwhelming *guanxi* demands.

Take the case of Jiangxi Province. Singapore's yearly SM2 quota for Jiangxi has been about 15 ever since the program started there in 2001, and the number of candidates invited to take the MOE written exams has always been around 50. In 2002, exactly 50 candidates took the exams, and there was no elimination exam prior to that. Back then, only two schools in the province were SM2-eligible, and both were located in the provincial seat Nanchang. The two schools simply recommended their candidates to the Jiangxi education bureau, one contributing 22, the other contributing 28. By 2011, however, five schools in Jiangxi Province were SM2-eligible, but the candidate quota did not increase—it was 48 for 2011. As the SM2 scheme became more widely known over the years, increasing numbers of students and parents became interested in the opportunity. This put the Jiangxi education bureau under pressure because many more parents with *guanxi* were keen to let their children have a go at the SM2 exam. Consequently, according to informants who experienced the 2011 selection rounds, a province-wide elimination exam was held in January, involving more than 270 students. But according to an official from the Jiangxi education bureau I spoke to, this was already modest compared to the previous few years, which apparently saw as many as 3000–4000 students across the province competing for the 50 or so places on the education bureau's final list.

The eligible schools also have various considerations and concerns of their own, which explain their varied ways of managing the invitation and application processes. Upon being notified by the provincial education bureau to recommend students for SM2, a school may either make the invitation entirely public or selectively notify students. In 2002, for example, one eligible school, School A in Jiangxi, did not publicize the invitation school-wide, whereas the other school opened the application to anyone who was interested. Making the invitation open necessarily attracts more applicants, so it is more complicated and time-consuming for the school. For instance, the latter school had to conduct an internal elimination exam to decide which students to recommend. Secondly, keeping the invitation under the table may serve some vested interests. For example, in the case of School A, several teachers managed to put forward their own children, who happened to be studying in their senior year two, as candidates. Some parents who had *guanxi* were also able to get the opportunity for their children.

However, the main concern the Chinese schools have about the SM2 program is the worry that sending students to Singapore undermines the schools' own talent pool. Although the schools do not waste good opportunities by recommending under-qualified students to take the SM2 exam, neither are they willing to put forward their top students. These are the "seeded players," who have the potential to win the school's honor and glory in the all-important Chinese University Entrance Exam, or *Gaokao*. For high schools in China, the number of students admitted to top domestic universities such as Tsinghua and Peking in *Gaokao* is arguably the most crucial indicator of their standing, which in turn translates into the schools' future popularity and clout. Hence, students with potential to enter top Chinese institutions are likely to be discouraged by their teachers from applying to SM2. In some schools, there may be an explicit policy prohibiting, say, the top 50 students in the year cohort to apply. Alternatively, the number of top students who are allowed to apply may be restricted. In yet other cases, instead of hard and fast rules, the school may try to dissuade top students from applying by convincing them that SM2 program in Singapore is not the best option for them, and that they would be better off remaining in China to study.

However, despite these possible school policies, parental *guanxi* easily takes precedence in the end. This was the case for one candidate from Jiangxi in 2002. The student in question often came up as the top-ranking student in the cohort, and statistically she was almost certain to make it into

the Tsinghua or Peking University if she took the *Gaokao*. When the school came to know that her name was on that year's education bureau SM2 candidate list because of her father's *guanxi*, the head teacher of the school was said to have paid a home visit to persuade her and her parents to give up on SM2. Eventually, however, the student went ahead anyway, won the scholarship and left for Singapore. For students who do not belong to such a "protected" category, the school is usually very supportive. Sometimes, the school actively helps the students with their applications by providing supportive reference letters or even organizing interview coaching sessions.

After the candidate lists have been finalized and submitted to the MOE in Singapore, MOE officials must travel in person to China and go from province to province to administer the written exams. They physically carry with them the exam papers, and afterwards, carry the answer sheets back to Singapore for marking. For SM2 15th batch in 2011, these written exams across various provinces took place mostly in March, and it was believed that four separate teams of MOE officials, carrying four distinct sets of exam papers, traveled to the 19 eligible provinces via different routes. As has been the standard practice throughout the years, the exams comprised four papers: mathematics, physics, English language and General Aptitude Test (GAT); all were completed within the course of a single day. In the case of Jiangxi 2011, these written exams took place in early March. Results were announced in early May, shortlisting 48 candidates to 24 for interviews at the end of May, thus giving a 50% pass rate at the written exams. On the evening of the interview day, 13 students were informed of their success, making for a gross success rate of just above 25%. These pass rates hold roughly true across all the provinces.

ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT: SM2 15TH BATCH, JIANGXI, 2011

Having looked at the SM2 program in terms of general facts and the recruitment process, I now shift the perspective to that of the scholarship candidates themselves. In what follows, the first subsection focuses on the candidates' sometimes ambivalent feelings toward the SM2 scholarship and toward Singapore. I describe the thoughts and concerns, but more often, the imaginations and desires that the Singaporean foreign talent scheme inspired in these students (as well as their parents). The second subsection portrays two candidates in Jiangxi 2011, one of

whom was eventually successful while the other was not. Interpreting their stories through the conceptual prism of social/cultural capital, I highlight the ways in which their differing family socioeconomic backgrounds and upbringings led to divergent personalities and “cultivations.” These two candidates’ eventually divergent SM2 application outcomes provide some hints as to what specific kind of human subjects Singapore desires. The final subsection is a quick sketch of the scholarship award ceremony for the successful candidates in Jiangxi 2011.

Perceptions and Feelings

After the results of the MOE written exams were announced in early May 2011 for the Jiangxi SM2 applicants, I set about to get in touch with the 24 shortlisted candidates. It turned out that twenty were living in Nanchang. Through their schools, I managed to meet 19 of them, and asked them to complete a simple qualitative questionnaire. Twelve survey forms came back to me in the end. In addition, with eight candidates who hailed from School A, I conducted a group discussion, asking them to talk freely about whatever concerns or thoughts they had about SM2.

In terms of these candidates’ general perceptions of Singapore, their answers were largely formulaic. Virtually all the applicants mentioned that Singapore was a beautiful “garden city” (*huayuan chengshi*), that it was one of the Asian “tiger economies” (*yazhou si xiaolong*), and that it was a safe and orderly society. Before the candidates took the SM2 exams, they were shown promotional videos brought by the MOE officials. Needless to say, being the postcard city-state it is, Singapore deeply impressed the students. This is not to say, however, that the candidates had no questions about Singapore. One candidate said to me, “Singapore has only shown us the shiny side of things.” She wanted to know in greater detail what it would actually be like to live and study there. It was also interesting that most candidates believed that the *suzhi*, or “quality,” of Singaporean citizens was high—higher than that of the Chinese.² Others pointed out that Singapore had one of the most efficient and least corrupted governments in the world, perceived to be a far cry from the situation in China. Echoing what Vanessa Fong writes in *Paradise Redefined* (2011), these young Chinese citizens indeed showed a tendency to have rosy imaginations about the developed world.

Pertaining to the SM2 program more specifically, the candidates’ opinions resembled each other’s too. They understood the rationale of the

program mainly in terms of “human capital exchange,” “human resource cooperation” or “mutually beneficial exchanges.” All informants seemed to know that Singapore launched such foreign talent programs in order to augment its human resource base, particularly in the fields of science and engineering. In other words, these would-be scholars seemed to understand well the instrumentality or the “appropriated-ness” (Long, 2011) characterizing the foreign talent subject-position. In fact, several male candidates voiced a rather more coarse-sounding version of this understanding, namely, that the scholars were recruited to “improve Singapore’s human genetic pool.” While it was never quite easy to ascertain how serious such cynical statements were meant to be—especially given that the speakers often spoke in a self-consciously cynical tone—there seemed to be other subscribers to such views too. In the fieldwork, I once heard a teacher at an SM2-eligible Nanchang school share with some other people, in all seriousness, what she felt she had discovered about the SM2 program through continuously observing a number of years’ selection outcomes. According to her, academic aptitude was no longer a concern in the final interview stage, whereas the candidates’ physical appearances played a decisive role, because it seemed to her that it was simply the better looking ones who were eventually picked by the Singaporean interviewers. To her, this supported the theory that Singapore was basically fishing for “good genes” in China. Those listening to her nodded in agreement, with no sign of incredulity.³ In fact, I was also asked by the father of a boy candidate of a fuller size figure—“Look at the way he is. Do you think he’ll make it?”

In any case, given that candidates seemed to appreciate the transactional dimension to the SM2 program, the majority of informants, when asked, suggested that they could accept the terms and conditions of the scholarship, not least the six-year bond, and thought they were “reasonable” or “fair.” The following are some of the typical responses found in the questionnaire answers:

Having received so much from Singapore, I think it’s reasonable to perform the service.

I think it’s a reasonable obligation—in any case for the six years we are going to get paid—it’s not as if it’s an unpaid service.

It’s the same to work in China or in Singapore. I don’t mind the six-year bond. It may actually turn out to be better, because I heard it’s easier to find a good job in Singapore than in China.

When asked if they felt being appropriated or made use of (*bei liyong*), one candidate responded with frankness: “It’s mutually making use of each other (*buxiang liyong*)—they use us for their ends, and we use them to our ends too. It’s a bit like ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’ (*gejing suoneng, gequ suoxu*).”

Only three candidates (25%) registered different opinions. Two of them simply said that a service period was “okay,” but six years was “a bit too long.” The third provided an interesting answer:

[Six years is] Too long. In my opinion, if Singapore really hopes to attract talent, they should make the students love the city from their hearts, so that the students will think Singapore is a place worth spending the best years of their youths, instead of imposing legally binding conditions. So I don’t think it’s reasonable, but I can appreciate why they are doing this.

It should be stressed that if someone did not approve of the six-year bond condition or thought Singaporean universities not worth attending, they would probably not have considered applying to the SM2 program in the first place. As the Chinese society has become more affluent on the whole, going abroad for undergraduate or postgraduate education is no longer a rare privilege for the urban families (Fong, 2011). Given this, the SM2 scholarship’s appeal to Chinese students may have decreased further considering the “bond”. The academically most capable students tend to be confident that the gates of Harvard or Yale stay wide open for them at some point in the future, while the financially very well-to-do parents can afford to send their children to Western countries and institutions without having to incur obligations. Thus, it may be assumed that those who have chosen to apply to SM2 were prepared to fulfill their obligations.

At least at the time of the interview, most candidates also seemed to accept the prospect that they would not easily be able to pursue post-graduate studies. In the *SMiraclebook*, a digital guidebook compiled by SM2 students already in Singapore to share insights with SM2 hopefuls in China, I found the following passage:

If you wish to pursue Master’s or PhD studies at local universities, you must apply to MOE. Since you will not be leaving Singapore, the approval is relatively easy to obtain. Financial deposit is still required, though in reality there may be some leeway. If you wish to study for a Master’s at a university outside Singapore, it’s more complicated: you need to apply to MOE,

then open a special bank account into which you deposit a financial guarantee. The bank account is frozen throughout the duration of your overseas graduate course, and you can only withdraw the deposit upon returning to Singapore. The amount of financial deposit varies from year to year. A former SM2 scholar who went for a Master's at Princeton suggested in his/her case the amount was 640,000 yuan. The deposit is calculated in terms of the total value of the SM2 scholarship plus 10% per annum compound interest. Without a Singapore citizen or Permanent Resident guarantor, the deposit can amount to over 1,000,000 yuan. (source: www.smiracle.com/bbs [now defunct, last accessed April 2011], author's translation)

This statement is corroborated by the experiences reported by some SM2/3 scholars who graduated and pursued further studies in recent years. I met a handful of them while I gave the finishing touches to this book manuscript. Compared to 2008–9, when scholars' applications for bond deferment were treated more sympathetically and on a "case-by-case" basis, in the years since, it appears that the Singaporean MOE has steeply raised the barriers in order to deter scholars from opting for postgraduate studies immediately after finishing their first degree. Now, not only are the MOE scholars tracked more systematically and closely through the implementation of an online reporting system, the deposit of a very substantial monetary guarantee appears to have become all but unavoidable. Furthermore, the deposit now applies not only to those who are heading for graduate programs outside Singapore, but also to those whose Singapore-based graduate program had an overseas component, even if just for a year or a semester. Thus, depending on the extent to which a scholar's graduate program is seen to take them beyond the orbit of Singapore, the amount of the deposit can vary between a portion (e.g. 40% or 60%) and the entirety of the worth of the financial assistance the scholars have received under their tenure.

Since the SM2/3 scholars' funding essentially comprises a "scholarship" component in addition to the blanket Tuition Grant (see Chapter 2), scholars intending to defer their bond are required to make separate deposits with respect to these two components, which are administered under the authorities of the university and the MOE respectively. Scholars pursuing a locally based graduate study program are generally exempted from making the deposit with respect to the scholarship component, but a deposit in respect to Tuition Grant may still be necessary. For example, the deposit required of an SM2 scholar who completed his Masters in 2014–15 at the

same Singaporean institution where he obtained his first degree amounted to S\$70,000. In short, the Singaporean MOE has apparently ramped up its efforts to enforce the terms and conditions of the SM2/3 scholarships in recent years. This was done probably in response to the increasing numbers of scholars wishing to pursue graduate studies either overseas or locally, as well as to general domestic sentiments and concerns regarding foreign talent issues.

Postgraduate education at Master's and PhD levels means a great deal to many Chinese students, because in the Chinese social context there is still a tendency to correlate a person's academic accomplishments with their socioeconomic success. The specific conditions behind the prevalence of this view are complex. Andrew Kipnis (2011b) argues that the Chinese educational traditions in the past and the competitive labor market at present make higher academic qualifications not so much indicators of specialist competence but rather a necessary means to distribute job positions that are far outnumbered by job-seekers. I found during the fieldwork that most parents, teachers and students still considered Master's and/or PhD qualifications an unquestionable good. Chinese parents, in particular, hold these views strongly, because many of them grew up during the Cultural Revolution, and they often believe that their life could have been better had they not been brutally disrupted in their education by the chaotic political movements. In China, parents strongly influence their children's educational choices (Bodycott, 2009; Fong, 2011). Consequently, a significant number of eligible and initially interested students were possibly put off from applying to SM2 because of the difficulty of pursuing postgraduate studies under the scheme. But even among the SM2 hopefuls, some parents were already contemplating the idea of paying the deposit when the time comes. In my group interview, five out of eight candidates mentioned that they would consider paying the deposit to enable postgraduate studies, but they also added, "It is still too early to worry about that."

In sum, most SM2 candidates felt they could appreciate and accept the terms and conditions of the scholarship, despite some minor misgivings. The same applied to their views on the restriction of university and course choices under the scheme. *Most* students suggested that they were interested in science anyway, and therefore there were no strong resistant feelings. (I highlight "most," because there certainly are exceptions, as I shall explore in detail in Chapter 6.)

When asked what they expected to gain and lose by taking up the SM2 program, the students' answers again converged. The most frequently

mentioned potential loss was the separation from family, friends, and a familiar environment. Others also pointed out they would lose the opportunity to build up social and professional networks in China, just as China was becoming the most dynamic economy in the world. I soon realized that asking the candidates about their potential loss in taking up SM2 gave them an opportunity to narrate a detachment toward the program, which would come in handy in case they failed getting selected in the end. A typical statement, which I am fairly certain is echoed by SM2 applicants elsewhere in China and across different batches, runs as follows:

SM2 selection for me is a challenge, and an opportunity to prove myself (*zhengming ziji*). If I got selected, I will be happy; if I didn't get selected, I might even be happier, because who knows what's the best path for me to take? Whether I want to go to Singapore or not, this is a good exercise, to show that I am also capable of another mode of exam. It's an eye-opener too. I won't be upset at all if I didn't get it. (from questionnaire answers)

Perceived gains, unsurprisingly, far outweighed the perceived losses. Candidates echoed each other in talking about how Singapore could provide them with a superior education; how the universities in Singapore were highly regarded in the world; how the research resources there were unparalleled by Chinese institutions; and how studying in Singapore would help them develop an "international perspective" and train them to be "bilingual elites," and so forth.

Two particular imagined gains stood out. One pertained to the perceived meritocracy and fairness of the Singapore system, and how the "rule of law is well-developed" (*fazhi jianquan*) there. Several students and parents ranked this very highly among Singapore's appeals to them. "In Singapore, you stand out because you are capable; in China you stand out because you have background or *guanxi*," as one mother told me, "My son is very simple-minded and naïve, he doesn't know how to manipulate *guanxi*, he is just a serious good student, and I believe Singapore's environment *suits him* better." Others echoed: "Singapore is governed by law; China is governed by people and *guanxi*;" "In China there is no transparency, it's all cloud and smoke (*wuyan zhangqi*); in Singapore everything follows law and procedures."

The emphasis on practical skills acquisition in Singaporean education was another area of perceived superiority over China's educational system. When asked what they believed to be the main difference between the

Chinese and Singaporean educational systems, virtually every informant suggested that the Chinese system was exam-driven (*yingshi jiaoyu*), in contrast to which, the Singapore system was believed to be focused on developing students' "practical skills" (*dongshou/shijian nengli*) and creative capacities. Parents and school teachers, few of whom had visited Singapore, held these views too, and they probably influenced the students' own discourse. I found it interesting how, with yet little actual insight into the Singaporean educational system and society, the candidates came to possess such strong, dichotomized views, which pitted a superior and desirable "other" against an inferior and undesirable "self." (Although I also realize that years ago I might have said exactly the same things when SM2 was in front me.) Whether these candidates' perceptions and imaginations about Singapore were to be confirmed or disabused subsequently, and whether their desires would be satisfied or disappointed, are questions that I follow up in later chapters; but the fact that the candidates eagerly entertained such imaginations bespoke their criticism of the current Chinese system which they knew only too well. For at least some SM2 aspirants, desiring Singapore was both a symbolic gesture of protest against a system that they found wanting as well as an attempt to break free from it.

Jun and Chen: Sketches of Two SM2 Candidates

It is mentioned earlier that SM2 did not attract the most socioeconomically privileged of Chinese students; so what kinds of background do the SM2 students come from? While this is not a question that can be answered satisfactorily in the absence of large datasets, what can be said is that my extensive contacts with many SM2 scholars from various provinces and cohorts revealed that they were predominantly children of urban families of middling standing. A great many SM2 scholars I got to know had parents who were doctors, teachers, civil servants and so on. Strictly speaking, these are certainly not rich or powerful families; but equally rare are those who come from truly humble origins.

During my Jiangxi fieldwork, I got to know several candidates and their families particularly well. Among them were two boys from School A—let me call them "Jun" and "Chen"—who came from quite different socioeconomic backgrounds and had contrasting upbringings and personalities. Thus, their eventually divergent application outcomes seemed to offer an interesting comment on the ways in which sociocultural capital possibly matters in the SM2 scholar selection.

Jun

Jun is from a rather well-to-do family. His father is the vice president of a private technical college in Nanchang, and his mother is an environmental engineer working for a government bureau. The family owns two comfortably sized sedan cars—a Lexus and a Honda—and lives in a spacious two-storey penthouse in a gated residential community. (They probably own a second or even a third property too, which is common for urban Chinese of their socioeconomic status.) Their upper-middle class affluence has made possible a good investment in Jun's education or, broadly speaking, "cultivation" from an early age. Jun plays the piano and guitar and is learning to play the saxophone. Since the time Jun was in primary school, his parents hired *waijiao* or native English-speaking teachers (which are still not so numerous in Nanchang as they are in some wealthier Chinese cities) to tutor Jun on spoken English for at least two hours a week. As a result, when I met Jun, I noticed that his spoken English was quite impressive for his age, making him stand out from his peers in school. But more significantly, according to Jun's parents, prolonged exposure to foreign teachers has also given him a somewhat liberal and non-traditional mentality and mannerism. This manifests in his Americanized spoken English—he has had mostly American *waijiaos*—and his casual and sometimes assertive demeanor. In fact, when preparing for the SM2 interview, Jun's parents became quite concerned that his casual and assertive personal style might be a liability. Nonetheless, the Jun I met was a 17-year-old with a strong character. He was fluent, sociable, confident, and obviously privileged.

Chen

On the other hand, there is Chen, who came from an urban working class family. His father was a worker at a state-owned road construction and maintenance company, while his mother worked in a bank branch as a clerk. Chen previously went to a small little-known junior middle school in the city, though for senior middle school, he was able to enter the prestigious and competitive School A. Chen's spoken English was not as fluent as Jun's, and he frequently mispronounced words. But his greater disadvantage was perhaps a lack of confidence in his manners. He spoke softly and smiled shyly. In contrast to Jun's self-assuredness, he interspersed his speech with sighs and expressions indicating hesitation such as "*aiya*," "hmmm," or "well, I don't know."

It was not that Chen lacked ideas or thoughts compared to Jun, but rather, he expressed them less articulately and less confidently. He is a

relatively quiet boy, and although he counts several sports among his hobbies, such as rope skipping, he does not boast any musical talent, nor does he play any instrument. Chen seemed to me a typical case of a “good child” (*hao haizi*) from less privileged backgrounds in the Chinese context. Academically capable students from less privileged backgrounds in China—and academically capable Chen surely was, notably more so than Jun if it was judged based on their usual performances in routine school exams—are often praised for being *dongshi*, which literally means “understand things,” implying that they know the importance of study as the only path leading to a better life. But children of this streak also tend to be filial and obedient in their personal ethos, which, at the social or interpersonal level, can be expressed in a demure and non-competitive demeanour.

Outcome

On the evening of the day of SM2 interviews, I received a text message from Chen, telling me that he wasn’t successful. Minutes later, at the other side of the phone was the mother of Jun, who shared with me in an ecstatic voice the news that Jun had made it! Chen would dutifully go back to school the next day and perhaps study even harder, as now he had no alternative but to face the *Gaokao* in about a year’s time. Jun, on the other hand, would not be back to school again, as he had many exciting plans. He wanted to improve his saxophone skills and also to learn to play band drums, which he hoped would be useful for the “talent show”—a yearly fixture of the SM2 bridging course—when he is in Singapore.

The Crowning Moment and the First Step in a Thousand-Mile Journey

The day after the interviews was the scholarship award ceremony. The panel of four—two MOE officials and two professors—who had interviewed the candidates the day before now sat on the dais in a conference hall, smiling, congratulating the winners.

Apart from administrative matters such as handing out and explaining the scholarship agreements to the scholars-elect, the main part of the ceremony was a speech given by “Madam Tan”, a relatively senior MOE official who had been in charge of the SM2 program for some years. What first struck me was how excellently Madam Tan spoke Mandarin. Apart from her speech speed, which was perhaps slightly slower than average, it was virtually impossible to tell her apart from a very good Mandarin

speaker in China. Everybody present was extremely impressed, and a feeling of cordiality filled up the hall.

As for the content of her speech, the single most prominent theme was to give advice to the scholars who were about to open a new chapter in their lives. Her voice was powerful yet affective, and ingeniously managed to come across as motherly and teacherly at the same time. As she started, “A door is now open, leading to a colourful and challenging future. How to go on after this door is open, all is up to you.”

She first praised the academic excellence of the scholars, saying that if they were not excellent, they would not be sitting with her; but immediately she turned to the point: academic excellence alone was not enough for the SM2 program. A strong capacity for self-discipline and a sense of responsibility are indispensable! She suggested that in the past, some SM2 scholars failed themselves, not because they were not clever enough, but because they lacked self-discipline. In the past 15 years, she said, the number of failure cases could be counted with her ten fingers;⁴ nevertheless, “each single case of failure is a painful experience, for both MOE and the scholars and their families.”

“Suddenly confronted with a hitherto unexperienced degree of freedom—freedom from the pressure of *Gaokao* and from parental supervision—some scholars fell, letting themselves and their parents down,” Madam Tan went on in a weighty tone. She then gave some examples. In one case, a scholar still in his bridging course, having succumbed to the temptation of the seductively abundant consumer society that Singapore is, was caught shoplifting. This was a “very serious” moral misconduct, and leniency was out of the question; the offending scholar was immediately dismissed from the program and sent back to China. Another case involved a boy who fell into a romantic relationship that severely affected his academic performance. Madam Tan met with him three times to talk to him, trying to help him. Despite this, the scholar’s performance did not improve but dropped further to the extent that he could not complete his bridging course; with regret, he was dismissed and repatriated too.

Accordingly, the scholars-elect in the hall were urged to learn to discipline themselves once they are in Singapore, to realize and always remember the responsibilities on their shoulders, and to keep close contact with their parents back at home as well as the MOE officials. Madam Tan’s insistence on the scholars’ keeping their parents updated was particularly notable. “Your parents are the source of your strength, they are always there for you, you must not let them worry; always stay in touch with

them,” she stressed. Indeed, later, when it was the turn for the two professors to speak, they reiterated the importance for the scholars to keep close contact with their family. One professor said:

You must know, you are here today only because of your parents! You must be grateful to them and seek to show your gratitude! In the remaining half a year before you go to Singapore, you should spend quality time with them. Once in Singapore, you should also make phone calls with them frequently.

It was interesting to observe how these admonitions hinted at the paternalism that some argue characterizes the Singapore state (Heng & Devan, 1995). Madam Tan spoke with a motherly solicitude for the well-being of the scholars, and she enlisted strength from the scholars’ real parents—who were all present at the ceremony—to ensure that the scholars knew the right things to do. Filial gratitude, which was repeatedly emphasized, was arguably an ethos that MOE would wish the scholars to develop in relation to Singapore as well. The unspoken second half of the professor’s statement “you are here today only because of your parents” could easily have been “you are here today also because of *Singapore*”, being the newly adopted parent of these scholars. Being awarded an MOE scholarship marked the Chinese scholars’ impending induction into the Singaporean regime of citizenship and subjecthood.

* * *

It is in such a tone that the pre-Singapore stage of the SM2 program resolves. Singapore secures the budding foreign talent that it will later nurture to become part of its human capital, while the scholars themselves are equally excited in terms of their fanciful imaginations and expectations of the forthcoming adventures in the city-state. Desires are set in motion, but so is discipline. As Madam Tan never tired of stressing, when desires are given certain freedoms and privileges, temptations and indiscipline tend to follow. This is perhaps the reason why *discipline* very much sets the tone for the bridging course that SM2 scholars undergo after their arrival in Singapore. In this bridging period, the scholars are subject to a highly regimented study routine set by MOE that ironically resembles their Chinese high school regimen. During term time, daily timetables are packed with studies. Purposefully chartered coaches ferry scholars to their bridging course venues in the morning and fetch them back again to

their hostels in the evening. The hostels are specially arranged for the SM2 scholars, where curfew rules usually apply. In some sense, the bridging course period is deliberately made to feel contiguous with the scholars' Chinese high school environment from which they have just stepped away.

The highly regulated and somewhat isolated nature of the SM2 bridging course made it difficult for me to gain access to the scholars to carry out meaningful ethnographic research. In any case, it is when the scholars fully enroll as university undergraduates, immersed in a multicultural Singaporean university campus, that issues concerning educational desire and social identity become more prominently manifested. I turn to these aspects of the PRC scholars' experiences in the remaining three chapters.

NOTES

1. Based on my conversations with a few SM2 scholars affected by this recently instituted policy, it seems that the CIP requirement could be a source of consternation. The scholars interpret this service requirement as both a way designed by the MOE for them to learn more about Singapore and a way for the MOE/government to show discontented Singaporeans that Chinese scholars are appreciative. Yet, some scholars feel thus mandating and quantifying what ought to be voluntary service has the reverse effect of creating a sense of alienation. This is especially so because not all kinds of charity work or community service qualify as CIP, and hence the scholars are required to deal with a fair amount of bureaucracy in terms of getting approval for their service work—which they sometimes have to find by themselves—to count toward CIP, and getting documentation and verification for the number of hours performed. For not a small number of SM2 scholars in the 17th batch, this CIP requirement has further heightened the transactional nature of the SM2 scholarship, and has possibly diminished some scholars' positive feelings toward Singapore/MOE due to the bureaucratic annoyance.
2. *Suzhi*, literally meaning “quality,” is a powerful and ubiquitous discourse in contemporary China. Various scholars have explored the multifarious meanings of this concept in different contexts (Fong, 2007; Kipnis, 2007; Murphy, 2004; Woronov, 2008, 2009). In the present context, the term roughly refers to a person's level of education, sophistication, civility, politeness, and moral integrity.
3. It is interesting how the offensiveness of these views and statements seems to escape not only the teenage candidates, but also many Chinese adults. In my opinion, something Lee Kuan Yew said decades ago might have contributed to a tendency of some Mainland Chinese people to be little

Singaporeans. According to Lee Kuan Yew's own memoirs, in 1978, just before China's open-up and reform, Deng Xiaoping visited Singapore. At the state banquet, Deng lamented that China would take a long time to get back on its feet, but Lee "countered that they [the Chinese] should have no problem getting ahead and doing much better than Singapore because we were the descendants of illiterate, landless peasants from Fujian and Guangdong while they had the progeny of the scholars, mandarins and literati who had stayed at home" (Lee, 2000, p. 662). While scholars (e.g. Barr, 2000; Heng & Devan, 1995) have indeed argued that Lee believed in human racial hierarchy and genetic determinism, it is not clear, in this context, whether Lee's statement to Deng really meant what it appeared to say. This notwithstanding, Lee's this remark became widely known in China since Lee's memoirs became available in Chinese. Furthermore, in 2006, Taiwanese intellectual pundit Li Ao controversially said in a widely watched talk show of his that "(Chinese) Singaporeans are stupid." The influence of such public figures on what people in the street say about certain things should not be underestimated.

4. This is certainly to be understood as a figure of speech.

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Singlish and the Singaporean: Cross-Cultural Encounter and Othering

Abstract This chapter looks at the PRC scholars' cross-cultural experiences on a Singaporean university campus by focusing on their encounters with Singlish and the figure of the Singaporean student. Singlish, the creolized informal local *lingua franca*, is experienced as an obstacle by many Chinese students when it comes to cross-cultural communication and engagement. The scholars' ways of negotiating with it range from partial adaptation to resistance or symbolic struggle that rests on a micro cultural politics of language. Meanwhile, some PRC scholars also develop certain judgmental stereotypes about their Singaporean peers on campus based on their biased observations of the latter. Such stereotyping stems not only from the failure of the local host and PRC scholars to engage each other meaningfully, but owes also to the differences between their respective cultural backgrounds and educational subjectivities.

Keywords Chinese international students • Interculturality • Cross-cultural encounter • Adjustment • Singlish • Stereotyping

Conscious of the research literature on international student-sojourners' experiences elsewhere, one of the questions I initially grappled with after beginning to examine the PRC scholars' life in the "University Institute Singapore" ("UIS") was where their cross-cultural issues lay, if there were

any. Does Singapore's ethno-cultural proximity to China mean that the PRC scholars encounter no notable problems of "transition?"

Zhou and Todman (2008, p. 222) observe that the most significant problems facing international students are often study-related. In the case of the PRC scholars in UIS, however, study-related problems were not found to be prominent. On the whole, the PRC scholars tend to do well academically, and this is evidenced in the "Dean's Lists" published by various UIS science/engineering schools or faculties on their noticeboards. When I examined these lists as I walked past them, I noticed that student names spelt in the easily recognizable Mainland Chinese *hanyu pinyin* style often dominated them. Many of my research informants seemed to adopt an apparently dismissive attitude toward study as the purpose of their university education; they often spoke along such lines: "Well, when it comes to study, [it's] no difference [from anybody else]...it's *not* the main point of undergraduate education." (See Chapter 6 for a dedicated discussion of this issue.) They say this, however, while by and large being able to maintain good to excellent academic performance. In one striking example, a second year female student told me in a completely nonchalant tone:

Well, study just has to be "dealt with" (*yingfu guoqiu*)... So if I eventually failed to get A for one or two subjects [in the entire undergraduate course], I won't be overly disappointed.

That study should turn out largely to be a "non-issue" for the majority of PRC scholars in UIS, of course, owes much to the fact that they were in the first place selected precisely for their academic strength (see Chapter 3). Furthermore, the scholars' financial assistance depends on their continuously satisfactory performance. Their exam results are closely monitored by both the universities and the Ministry of Education, and if a scholar's Grade Points Average (GPA) drops below 3.5 (out of 5; equivalent to average B+), their scholarship is liable to be terminated. This is not to deny, though, a very small number of PRC scholars do fail academically. Based on personal observations as well as hearsay from fieldwork, I have known a handful of scholars who either dropped out of the scholarship program prematurely before returning to China or who had their scholarship revoked resulting in their taking out student loans or receiving parental bailouts to complete their courses.

Academic success, however, is only one dimension to successful educational sojourn, which further involves the important dimension of socio-cultural adjustment (Li & Gasser, 2005). Problems and issues concerning language, which are also widely reported in extant research, occupy a more ambiguous place in the experiences of the PRC scholars at UIS. Generally speaking, Singapore, being a multilingual society with an ethnic Chinese majority, presents a much smaller obstacle for international students from China in terms of initial linguistic adjustment. Not a few of my informants recalled an interesting experience relating to language at the beginning of their Singapore sojourn. The following comment made by SM3 scholar Cheng Yi (M, 20), a second-year engineering major, is illustrative of this not uncommon experience:

At first I thought people in Singapore all speak English, and I made myself a fool by initially speaking English everywhere! (laugh) But they speak back to me in Mandarin, and everywhere I go, supermarkets, shops, even classmates in school [university]...they just speak Mandarin to me. And then I can't be bothered to speak my handicapped English any more. We all thought we were going to have language barriers, but that's not the case.

During a semi-structured group interview with three final year students majoring in Electrical and Electronic Engineering (EEE), the interviewees half-jokingly told me that for Chinese students/scholars studying EEE—the school with possibly the highest concentration of Chinese students in UIS—they could get through four years of undergraduate education without needing to speak much English. While this was obviously a sort of cynical overstatement that I not infrequently encountered among male engineering students, it nevertheless revealed several facts about their undergraduate experience. First, since EEE has the largest number of PRC scholars, if they wished, they often could avoid having to team up with Singaporeans or other international students for group-based coursework. Often, local students also prefer not to work with foreign peers for fear that the latter's poor language competence would impede communication or compromise the group performance. Secondly, many academic staff members in UIS, especially in the science/engineering faculties, are themselves originally from China, which results in off-class discussions and interactions sometimes being carried out in Mandarin. Thirdly, because of their unique pedagogic background, Chinese students often demonstrate a propensity for self-study (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996), which means that they tend

to spend long solitary hours in the library or their dorm rooms. On one or two occasions, I even saw Chinese students in the UIS library poring over the classic green-cover *Gaodeng Shuxue* (Advanced Mathematics)—a foundational textbook widely used in universities in China—presumably to supplement their studies. Given these circumstances, “language shock” did not seem to stand out as a big issue for the PRC scholars, virtually all of whom are engineering or science majors. Compared to Chinese educational sojourners in Anglophone countries, who often study subjects that require stronger written and oral English communication skills such as business, the PRC scholars in Singapore certainly have a much less troubled initial adjustment. However, although initial academic and everyday linguistic adjustments might be relatively smooth, there is another story to be told when it comes to PRC scholars’ sociocultural encounter. Here, language re-emerges as an issue, particularly “Singlish.”

SINGLISH: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF LANGUAGE ADAPTATION

My informants pointed out that while the typically bilingual Chinese Singaporeans might choose to speak to them in Mandarin, thus making communication easier, Mandarin is not the language Singaporeans commonly use among themselves. Instead, Singlish, a uniquely Singaporean version of creolized English that liberally incorporates Malay and Chinese dialect vocabularies (Deterding, 2007), is the *lingua franca* among young Singaporeans. Most PRC scholars reported being ill at ease with Singlish initially, and I found that most informants, including many who had been in Singapore for quite a number of years, typically did not distinguish between Singlish on the one hand and English spoken with the Singaporean accent on the other. While the former is a form of *patois* or creole tongue usually spoken very fast by Singaporeans in informal social settings, it should be regarded as a far cry from English with “standard” grammar and vocabulary albeit spoken in the Singaporean accent (Lee, 2007, p. 66). However, it was typical for the Chinese scholars to consider the latter too Singlish.

Having been previously trained in their middle schools in China to regard only the American and/or the British accent as the “proper” way to speak English, the PRC scholars tend to regard Singapore-accented English as a non-standard and aesthetically inferior linguistic form. In any case, although Singapore-accented English is relatively easy for the scholars to get used

to, the more socio-culturally embedded and cryptic Singlish remains an obstacle. Informants frequently mentioned they used to feel being socially excluded by Singaporeans either because the Malay or Chinese dialects (mostly Hokkien) terms used in Singlish prevented them from getting the gist of the communicative flow or because, even if they understood the Singaporeans, they had no ability to partake in Singlish conversation or banter. Thus, Singlish, as a unique marker of identification (Ho, 2006; Leong, 2011, pp. 560–562) and arguably a potent vehicle for cultural intimacy (Herzfeld, 2005) among Singaporeans,¹ has the marked effect of excluding and isolating “others,” such as the PRC scholars. As one of my interviewees Yin Le (F, 19) recollected during an interview:

I remembered 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. Sometimes I don’t understand them, but even when I understand I don’t know what to say back. Gradually they no longer engaged with me, and it gave me a kind of “oppressive” feeling (*yapo de ganjue*)...

Regarding Singlish, in her study of young Korean migrant students in Singaporean public schools, Kang (2012, p. 168, emphases added) notes that “many Korean students come to value Singlish as a *solidarity marker*, as the language of their local friends in the domain of friendship.” As I also observed in fieldwork, most PRC scholars seemed cognizant of the importance of Singlish in lubricating communication with their Singaporean peers; some actually claimed that they would switch to Singlish when speaking with the locals. It should be noted, however, when referring to Singlish, what they really meant was usually Singapore-accented English, which they achieve by modifying their English—which is not “perfect” to begin with—with some of the prominent features of the Singaporean English accent in terms of intonation, stress, rhythm, in addition to unique customary local pronunciations of certain words. Regarding the last, one male informant once flippantly offered me a rule-of-thumb research tool: he suggested, to see if somebody has “localized,” the easiest test is to hear they pronounce the word “three”—whether with a non-sibilant interdental fricative as per the common English pronunciation or in the typical Singaporean way as “tree.” The furthest the Chinese students would go in trying to speak Singlish normally involves dropping

a few “lah,” “lor,” “meh”—particles derived mostly from Chinese dialects—in their speech or appropriating some common short expressions or sentence structures used by Singaporeans; but whether they manage to “pull off” these features appropriately *à la* Singlish is often hit-or-miss. None of my informants, except for several who actually hailed from Fujian province (where the Hokkien dialect is spoken), claimed to have much knowledge of the Chinese dialect terms used in Singlish, let alone the Malay ones. For the PRC scholars, a more readily practicable form of linguistic adjustment involves twisting their accent in speaking Chinese to imitate the way Chinese Singaporeans speak Mandarin. Doing this is much easier and arguably equally effective in creating some sense of identification and amity with the local Chinese; thus, this strategy of speaking Singapore-style Mandarin was a more widely observed phenomenon.

Whether in relation to Singlish, Singapore-accented English or Singaporean Mandarin, it should be noted, the efforts different individuals were willing to put into such adaptive behaviors, and the levels of success different individuals attain in doing so, seemed to vary greatly. To some Chinese students, sporting the Singaporean accent might be a largely unconscious and “natural” outcome of frequent daily contact with the locals; for others, this might involve more conscious efforts. In addition, a number of variables, such as different individuals’ varying natural flair for language as well as personality and temperament, seemed to affect their attitudes toward linguistic adaptation. It is difficult to draw out any clear analytical patterns, but generally speaking, it seemed that girls were more willing to and capable of picking up Singaporean accents while the boys appeared less enthusiastic or successful; the more academically focused scholars tended to be less susceptible to influence, whereas the more socially active or extroverted individuals appeared to enjoy code-switching as social situations demanded. Obviously, the length of a person’s stay in Singapore is also an important factor, though not one that necessarily works in a straightforwardly linear fashion. Having spent longer time in Singapore usually means more exposure to Singlish and Singaporean accents, yet as the Chinese scholar-sojourners further develop their self-identities in relation to education and work, their dis/identification with Singaporean culture, and consequently with Singaporean speech accents, may also change in complicated ways. The specific social contexts of the scholars’ daily lives—where they study and work, with whom they study and work, and so on—inevitably influence their linguistic practices in their subsequent sojourn journeys in Singapore.

While linguistic adaptations to the local form as mentioned above seem to underscore the PRC scholars' desire to "fit in," adaptation is not the only response. In fact, language could also become an arena for a micro cultural politics to play out in relation to discrimination and social recognition. Although many Chinese Singaporeans choose to speak Mandarin to the PRC students, there are also those who are either not able or not willing to do so. Given the negative social discourses and perceptions in Singapore society pertaining to foreign talent, it did not surprise me when some of my informants confessed to having felt being looked down upon by Singaporeans in one way or another. Often, a convenient occasion for the expression of such discriminatory attitudes is when the PRC scholars' relatively poor command of English or their Chinese-tainted English accents irritate the Singaporean ears. Han, a 19-year-old second-year Bioengineering major, mentioned in our interview that once, when a Chinese friend and classmate of his volunteered to answer a question raised by the professor during a lecture, a group of Singaporean male students seated at the back of lecture room simply broke out laughing, possibly at the silly eagerness of this "PRC scholar" to answer the professor's question, but more probably at his "funny" spoken English, which was not very fluent and had a strong Chinese accent.

These experiences *per se* are not dissimilar to the language-based social discrimination and exclusion faced by (Chinese) international students elsewhere (e.g. Tian & Lowe, 2009). Tananuraksakul and Hall's (2011) study in the Australian context argues that perceptions of linguistic incompetence could affect international students' emotional well-being and even their sense of dignity. What is noteworthy here is that those PRC scholars in Singapore who experienced such discrimination or feelings of insult found themselves in a position to resist or even launch counter-insults by mobilizing certain cultural and symbolic resources available to them. For example, the PRC students' most typical counter-strategy is to belittle Singlish or Singapore-accented English, and implicitly those who speak them, by appealing to a symbolic hierarchy of Englishes which valorizes the more authoritative British or American accents. Indeed, counterbalancing those who showed adaptiveness to the "local" ways, in fieldwork I also came across not a small number of PRC scholars who actively resisted adopting the Singaporean English accent, convinced that the latter lacked aesthetic quality and international prestige. A small minority, either due to

their previous educational background or their current aspiration, would even make a point to imitate the American accent (manifested particularly in the ubiquitous and exaggerated rhotic) or the British accent. To Singaporeans, such feigned foreign accents put up by the PRC scholars come across as cringe-inducing pretentiousness no less silly or laughable than Mainland Chinese-tainted English accents. But when Singaporeans express their disdain, the PRC scholars could always counter by mocking Singlish and the Singaporean accents in return. A not uncommon observation made by my interlocutors about Singaporeans' linguistic abilities is that (Chinese) Singaporeans are "half buckets of water" (*bantong shui*, Chinese colloquial idiom meaning half-baked) in both English and Chinese,² and therefore they have no legitimacy in laughing at the Chinese on the point of language incompetence. One cynical and grumpy informant once remarked thus regarding Singaporeans—"They speak *Singlish* as if it's *English*" and that "They can't even speak a complete sentence in *proper* Mandarin!"

By thus mobilizing a resource available to him, namely, mother tongue superiority, this scholar and others who share his opinion reclaim some sense of self-worth and dignity and carve out some comfort space amidst experiences of discrimination. As research in social psychology has found, psychological defense mechanisms arise when a person feels threatened or injured (Cramer, 2000). Furthermore, in such defensive coping, culture itself may be drawn upon as a powerful symbolic source of strength (Kuo, 2011). The PRC scholars' variegated attitudes toward and engagements with Singlish—a metonymy for Singaporean culture and society—should thus be seen as underpinned by both desires to adapt and desires to self-defend through a micro cultural politics.

THE "HIGH" SINGAPOREAN: STEREOTYPES AMIDST FAILURES TO ENGAGE

While Singapore's ethno-cultural proximity to China may render it less curious a place for the PRC scholars hence making the latter's adjustment problems less severe, there could be other pitfalls. The significant presence of PRC foreign talent in the UIS campus offers them the tempting option to stay cooped up in their own comfort zones. The cultural symbolic resources they mobilize for psychological defense against local discrimination could easily turn into forms of antisocial discourses

and attitudes that threaten their integration in a multicultural university campus and jeopardize harmonious interaction with the host nationals. Attending to such sociocultural dynamics, in this section, I look at some contentious stereotypical images that some PRC scholars developed about the Singaporeans amidst failures to establish meaningful mutual engagement.

Although not all my informants made equally strong assertions, they generally agreed that as foreign students they should aim to interact and connect with their Singaporean peers. In an interview, I probed my interlocutor Gao Mei (F, 18, mathematics major) by asking her: As a Chinese foreign talent scholar in Singapore, even without such interactions and connections, you would have virtually no problem, so why is interaction important? Her answer piqued my interest: “Interaction (*jiaoliu*) perhaps is not very important (*zhongyao de*). But I think it’s a *must* (*bixu de*)! Or I should say it’s an *obligation* (*yiwu*).” I then further pursued by asking what in her opinion constituted meaningful interaction with the locals, and there came her even more interesting reply:

Perhaps meaningful interaction with them is being able to get “*high*” together with them (*gen tamen yiqi high*). But we can’t seem to...

What is the meaning of this getting “high,” which in Gao Mei’s opinion seemed to stand in PRC scholars’ way of achieving meaningful connection with their Singaporean peers on campus?

Previous research (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977; Kuh, 1995; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002) has noted the importance of Extra-Curricular Activities (ECA) as providing valuable opportunities for international students to meet and interact with host nationals and forge meaningful connections. When Gao Mei mentioned “getting high,” it turned out she was referring to her observation of the Singaporean university students in the context of ECAs and the PRC scholars’ difficulties in connecting with them.

In regard to ECAs, the university campus culture in Singapore seems to bear the imprints of Anglo-American university campus cultural forms (see Nathan, 2005), including orientation camps with outrageous pranks, residential hall Junior Common Room Committees (JCRCs) and their social events, myriad kinds of university-wide hobby societies, and sports-related clubs with dedicated members who train to the

neglect of study. Such campus ECA cultures come across as new and alien to most PRC scholars, whose previous schooling experiences consisted mostly of highly disciplined routines in the Chinese senior middle schools.

In sharing living and learning spaces in the UIS campus, the PRC scholars' relatively studious disposition and sedentary lifestyles bring into relief the more physically and socially active lifestyles of the Singaporean students. Some of my informants self-stereotypically characterized the PRC scholars as being somewhat *zhai*,³ or antisocial in the sense of preferring to stay in dorm rooms to study or to consume Internet-based entertainment such as watching movies or playing computer games. Thus, although they live amidst Singaporeans and other international students in more than a dozen residential halls in UIS, PRC scholars are typically not well knit into the hall communities—the hall JCRCs tend to be the exclusive domain of local students. The local students' greater enthusiasm for ECA activities such as orientation camps, sports competitions and so forth, stands out in the Chinese scholars' observation and perception.

The “orientation” activities may serve here as an example to illustrate how judgmental perceptions and stereotypical images could take shape amidst failures to understand and connect. My PRC scholar interlocutors expressed a spectrum of views regarding the orientation activities that they either went through or observed at the beginning of their university lives. While some suggested they had fun, most informants seemed to hold more ambivalent views. What Zhou Peng (M, 23, final-year engineering major) said in our interview was representative of the views at the negative end of the spectrum:

The orientations were just silly: running around the campus, crawling in muddy grounds, blind-folding you and pressing your head into toilet bowls...all that kind of stuff. [...] I wish they could do something more meaningful, more cultural, more sophisticated (*you shendū*), you know. But the locals seem to enjoy it so much, they get so *high* [sic, in English] on it! I can't fathom what get them so *high* on these activities...

Zhou Peng's judgmental tone was not shared to the same extent by most other PRC scholars I talked to, but even for those informants who told me they did participate in “Hall Orientation Camp” and thought it

fun, they still expressed amazement at how energetic, how “crazy” (*feng*), and how “high” the local Singaporean students could get.

As they told me, to take part in the orientation camps often involved staying awake for long hours to play physically demanding sports or prankish and embarrassing “ice-breaking” games; in addition there are “lame” joke-telling, collective singing, cheering, and all sorts of compulsory jovial rowdiness. Although by self-selection those Chinese scholars who took part in such events tended to be extroverted personality types, they nevertheless found keeping up with Singaporeans’ “high” spirits during these activities somewhat exhausting. From several informants’ detailed descriptions of their experiences in these orientation camps, I figured that they tended to remain at the margins of these events, and their not being able to get as “high” might have come across as a spoiler or put-off for the Singaporeans. Viewing these orientation camps and similar events from an anthropological perspective, it may be posited that their core function is to reinforce social bonding and feelings of camaraderie through deliberately using embarrassing and “silly” activities to tear up people’s masked social performance and staged persona (Goffman, 1969). Yet, because the PRC scholars are little acquainted with the rules, codes and scripts in such somewhat ritualized bond-building activities, to them, these events have the reverse effect of alienating them. As a result, even for those PRC scholars who tried to get “high” together with their Singaporean peers, they mostly end up regarding getting “high” this way somewhat “silly” (*sha*) and “pointless” (*meiyisi*). Consequently, a stereotypical image of the Singaporean students as prone to getting “high” on pointless ECA activities begin to form in the minds of some.

The failure for jokes or humor to translate effectively across cultural and linguistic boundaries was another issue mentioned by a handful of my informants on separate occasions. Jokes that seemed to set Singaporean students on a “high” laughing trip often seemed “lame” (*leng*) or anticlimactic to the PRC scholars, resulting in puzzlement and social awkwardness. A female informant once remarked, in what came across to me as a genuine tone of bewilderment:

The locals like to “auto-high” (*zi-high*): they get together, in classroom, or in the hall common room...and suddenly they burst out laughing and excited among themselves. Sometimes even when I heard their jokes or whatever, I wonder: is it really that funny? How can they get so *high*?

Intrigued by this image of the “high” Singaporean students in the minds of some PRC scholars, I asked other informants to see if they held a similar impression; it turned out a few of them echoed in one way or another, “Oh ya, locals are very *high*!” For the majority, this tended to be a casual remark they made with a smile as a small point of curiosity, but a small handful of interlocutors would connect Singaporeans’ being “high” in various manners to more pejorative notions of being “silly” or “shallow.” This reveals the deleterious potential of social stereotyping.

One informant, Yuntao (M, 21, third year engineering major), who agreed with other PRC scholars on the impression of Singaporeans being “high,” nevertheless offered what seemed to me a valuable insight that did not come out of most other informants. The semester before our interview, Yuntao had a Chinese Singaporean as roommate, and during this time he heard many interesting tales from his local “roomie” about the experiences of serving as a soldier in Singapore’s armed forces—a two-year National Service (NS) compulsory to all male Singaporean citizens upon finishing secondary education. Yuntao believed that the army culture which seemed to imbue the NS men with certain kinds of masculine homosocial styles and comradely ethos⁴—though he wasn’t using any such jargon—goes some length toward explaining the “high” behaviors of the (male) Singaporean students that apparently puzzled some PRC scholars, including himself initially. Research in social psychology (e.g. Kurman & Ronen-Eilon, 2004) has identified a positive correlation between the lack of knowledge of the host culture’s social axioms and the adaptation difficulties experienced by immigrants; in this light, the National Service which virtually all local male university students have undergone seems a good example of the axiomatic Singaporean experience about which PRC scholars lacked knowledge.

Furthermore, in contrast to the conventional notions of masculinity based on physical prowess and homo-sociality that underpin the perceived “high” behaviors of the (male) Singaporeans, scholars of Chinese society and education have found the idea of “literary masculinity” (Kipnis, 2011a; Louie, 2002) useful in describing an alternative conception of the masculine in China which associates *literary* finesse, bookishness, learnedness, intellectual accomplishment with social worthiness of the male gender. For the small number of my informants—virtually all male—who interpreted Singaporeans’ stereotypical “high” behaviors as signs of their being “stupid,” “brawn over brain,” and “intellectually inferior,” it seems the concept of literary masculinity, arguably ingrained in these Chinese foreign talent through their Chinese education (see Chapter 2), offered

an explanation. Taking a psychoanalytic view, it could even be suggested that the male PRC scholars are driven by their unconscious sense of inadequacy in conventional masculinities in comparison to Singaporean young men—who have the advantage of having been toughened up by two years in the military—to emphasize literary masculinity and to devalue physical masculinity and styles associated with it. An informant, Junheng (M, 19, physics major), once mentioned in passing that he thought Chinese boys were not as attractive as Singaporean boys to the Chinese girls because the Singaporeans boys all had a “sexy” physique. He also believed this was the reason why more and more Chinese students in UIS were driven to taking up gymming.

In any case, as “foreign talent” in receipt of Singapore government’s scholarships, the PRC scholars continue to attach high importance to academic accomplishment, an attitude which further inflects their interpretations of the Singaporean students. Thus, despite being aware that connection and integration with Singaporeans would require their acceptance of or even participation in the local “high” student culture, most PRC scholars remained instinctively resistant. Gao Mei, the girl who first brought to my attention the image of Singaporeans being “high,” nevertheless confessed:

I guess I don’t really like their way of getting *high*. They are like...for example, the JCRC people gather at 2 am, and sing songs loud [as part of some group games or party], but I want to sleep, have to go to lectures early tomorrow morning! And the problem is their way of getting high seems so silly (*sha*): singing, jumping around... Don’t get me wrong, I think they are all nice people, but I don’t see how I can join them and get high in their way...I’d be thinking to myself “What am I doing?!”

Examining this discourse of the PRC scholars about their Singaporean peers reveals the multicultural university campus as a potentially treacherous terrain with hidden traps for stereotyping the “other”. The confidence (or *hubris*) that some PRC scholars in UIS derive from their superior academic abilities compared to the average Singaporean students reinforces certain stereotypical images of the latter. However, the situation here is not dissimilar to the PRC scholars’ reaction to Singlish as analyzed in the previous section: negatively stereotyping the “other” could well be a strategy to cope with the frustration arising from the failure to

forge connections with the “other.” This failure arises in the first place out of the Chinese students’ lack of local knowledge as well as the local host’s prejudice, but the failure may be perpetuated subsequently in further processes of stereotyping.

Just as Singlish enhances mutual identification among the Singaporeans and excludes the “others,” those campus ECA activities in which Singaporeans get “high” among themselves are also ones that can easily marginalize or exclude other international students such as the PRC scholars. Thus, those among my interlocutors who adopted judgmental discourses on Singaporean students on these matters may be interpreted as exercising an offensive defense against perceived marginalization and exclusion.

The role of educational subjectivities in forming stereotypes

Other than being motivated by a semi-conscious process of social-psychological defense, the moral-ideological subjectivities of the Chinese students as analyzed in Chapter 2 arguably play a role in shaping their perceptions of the Singaporeans too. Among a handful of my informants, I noticed a discourse that extended the pejorative judgments of Singaporean students in the settings of ECA or university campus culture to a wider sociocultural context. In relation to this, the most trenchant remark probably came from Yushu (M, 23), a final year engineering major. Although Yushu studied engineering like virtually all other PRC scholars, he had a broad range of intellectual interests in the social sciences and humanities. When I visited his dorm room, I noticed that the shelves above his desk were filled up with Chinese books on topics ranging from history to literature to popular sociology. Yushu joked to me that based on his self-motivated learning, the UIS registrar should add “Minor in History” on his degree certificate. While chatting casually before we started our interview, he pulled out the Chinese version of Lee Kuan Yew’s memoirs *The Singapore Story* from the shelf and told me he had finished reading that not long ago. He then added: “I don’t think any of the Singaporeans in UIS has even read this!” In the interview that followed, I was somewhat struck by Yushu’s directness when he commented on Singaporeans:

Well, most of them don’t have enough cultivation (*xinyang bugou*). I’m not talking about all Singaporeans, I’m talking about those I found around me in the first two years of uni. When we [PRC scholars] talk we talk about politics, international affairs and so on... But what do Singaporeans care about?

They just care about which restaurant is good, which celebrity is releasing a new album, when the new iPhone is to be released or what bag looks nice, and things like that. Intellectually we are not at the same level, so, mundane interaction is ok, but you can't have deep interaction with them.

Yushu accepted my request of interview with an earnest and serious attitude, and I did not detect in his tone or mannerism any trace of levity or sarcasm. This excerpt was Yushu's reply to my question asking him to self-evaluate his success in establishing meaningful connections with Singaporeans at UIS. His implicit position was that his lack of success in this regard—which he freely admitted—was not due to a lack of initiative, will or ability, but because he didn't find the local students to be his intellectual equals. Thus, there was perhaps a justificatory or defensive thrust to his statement. But importantly, more than a dismissive caricature of the Singaporean "other" *per se*, Yushu's critique seemed to me to be targeted rather at what he saw as the vulgar consumerism and lack of cultural depth of the Singapore society in general. In other words, for PRC scholars like Yushu who otherize their Singaporean peers in uncharitable ways, it was possible to read their opinionated views as infused, or perhaps *confused*, with a kind of sociological and humanistic critique. But oftentimes, it can be difficult to disentangle the critiques at Singapore from the critiques at Singaporeans.

Wen Shu's (F, 20, Maritime Studies major) following comment—amidst our wide-ranging interview in which I asked her to reflect on the implications of her Chinese education background for her experiences in Singapore—illustrates this point too:

I'm very grateful to the education back in China because it laid down for me a very strong foundation in language/literature (*yuwen de jichu*). It was only after coming to Singapore I realize that if you ask a Singaporean to speak for an uninterrupted hour in one language they won't be able to do it. And I don't think that's good. Education back in China also opened my mind to the world of literature and ideas. It has positive influences on me, so that after coming to Singapore I'm at least not so totally overwhelmed by the materialism (*wuzhi de dongxi*) here. Life here is very stressful, and when I get nervous, I will recite some classic Chinese poetry or prose, that makes my mind peaceful.

Wen Shu's comment about Singaporeans not being able to speak in one language for an hour captures a view that tends to occur to some Chinese students, which sees Singaporeans' linguistic hybridity as evidence of

the speaker's lack of articulacy and depth of knowledge (cf. Lee, 2007, pp. 125–126). Indeed, this is often an implicit or sometimes explicit argument the Chinese scholars use to devalue the speaking of Singlish. The speech practice of the Singaporeans, characterized by frequent multi-lingual code-switching and code-mixing, invokes the Chinese idiom *bo'er bujing*, meaning “broad but not deep,” the basis for Wen Shu's disapproval above. But, as the quote also shows, she then turned to speaking about how having a deep and rich literary tradition—reciting classic Chinese poetry or prose—enabled her to cope with the overwhelmingly stressful materialism of the Singapore society. Wen Shu's comment exemplifies the moral-ideological dimension of the Chinese educational regime in shaping subjectivity and desire. She drew from traditional Chinese literature as a moral-ideological resource to tame unruly desires that manifest in her anxiety and nervousness in response to Singapore's seductive and engulfing materialism. Her act may be described in Foucauldian terms as a “technology of the self” (Foucault, 1988).

As I analyzed in Chapter 2, the normalization of desire visited upon the students by the Chinese middle school regime inculcates in them certain sets of ideological rhetoric, of which both Yushu's and Wen Shu's interview comments quoted above are examples. The search for worth in life, the quest for intellectual profundity, the pursuit of high moral ideals, the personal assumption of national and historical responsibilities: all such highbrow rhetoric are valued tropes and imaginaries in Chinese students' literary, moral and socio-political education, which induct them into certain ideologized and sentimentalized discursive habits. For some of my PRC scholar interlocutors, these moral-ideological discursive habits were activated when they encountered the Singaporean “other” amidst failures to achieve meaningful communication, leading them to develop a discourse that castigated their Singaporean peers as “shallow.” The more deeply ingrained such moral-ideological discursive habits in the Chinese student, the more likely their perceptions of the Singaporeans and the Singapore society were to be inflected in such ways.

Junheng, a sentimental young man who was already in his third year as a physics major at the mere age of 19 (having accelerated his progress because of outstanding academic abilities), also instantiates the moral-ideological subjectivity when he spoke about his perceived inability to connect with Singaporeans:

Here [Singapore] human connection (*renyuren zhijian de jiaoliu*) is not deep. We can only talk to other PRC students. Together we can talk about life (*shengcun*), philosophy (*zhhexue*), ideals (*lixiang*)... But we can't talk about these things with Singaporeans, even if we want to. They just don't seem to talk about these things. So you can only talk about very superficial stuff.

In fact, Yushu, the informant who strikingly characterized the Singaporeans he observed in the context of UIS as lacking in “cultivation,” also demonstrated certain latent awareness of how his own educational subjectivities and his being a subject of the Chinese sociocultural and political milieu subtly conditioned his views on the Singaporeans. During our conversation, upon hearing his striking comment, I put to him the follow-up question “Why do you think Singaporeans have less ‘cultivation’?”—to which Yushu replied:

In an advanced country (like Singapore), when the people are generally well-to-do and content, they don't need to care about too much, they just need to enjoy life. [...] In China, we live in an atmosphere saturated which political economy...*that's why we Chinese think so much (xiang de duo)*. We are always thinking about our own future, as well as our nation's. [...] Perhaps also has to do with education—from very young, the school and teachers always told us to care about public affairs, the nation...to read poetry, to read world classics, to make ourselves thoughtful (*you sixiang*).

Arguably, there is a logical fallacy in both Junheng's and Yushu's discourses as I quoted above. Having failed to engage deeply with or to be engaged by their Singaporean peers in the university context, the only subjects that they had deep thoughtful communications with were in fact other PRC scholars, which inevitably led to the conclusion that they “think so much.” The Singaporean students in UIS became an “other,” whom the PRC scholars did not get to know. This “other” figure became flattened into a stereotypical image based on the Chinese students' partial, sometimes biased, observations amidst rather limited contacts.

* * *

In the final analysis, I argue that despite some PRC scholars' apparently dismissive or belittling characterization of their local peers, there is a demonstrable desire for achieving meaningful connection. This desire, however, is often frustrated. The stereotypical imaginations held by the

small number of PRC scholars in UIS ought to be interpreted more than anything else as a self-protective retrospective rationalization and justification for the failure of engagement in a multicultural university campus.

NOTES

1. Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld calls those aspects of a cultural identity that could be considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with an assurance of common solidarity *cultural intimacy*. He argues that such cultural intimacy is a crucial force that binds the nation-state community together. In the Singapore context, Singlish seems an example of cultural intimacy par excellence; on the one hand, it is cherished by many as a unique local identity marker, yet, on the other hand, it is also a source of “cultural cringe” (Mattar, 2009) and embarrassment to Singapore’s aspiration to be a truly global city boasting human talents with global-standard cultural and educational capitals. This sense of embarrassment was apparently so acute that in 2000 the Singapore state officially launched a “Speak Good English Campaign” (Hoon, 2003; Rubdy, 2001).
2. See Pakir’s (1993) article entitled *Two Tongues Tied*.
3. *Zhai*, literally meaning house/home in Chinese, is a Sinicized appropriation of the Japanese notion *otaku*. In the Japanese context *otaku* has connotations related to the manga/anime geek subculture (Ito, Okabe, & Tsuji, 2012). Speaking of *Zhai* in the Chinese social/linguistic context may refer to geek cultures and behaviors, but can more broadly refer to the act of withdrawing oneself from social contact and immersing oneself in one’s own world. *Zhai* behaviors seem to have particular pertinence to Chinese college students (Zhang, 2013).
4. Popular culture productions in Singapore have often drawn inspirations from this national institution that is unique and idiomatic to the city-state’s citizens’ life experiences; see, for example, Singaporean film director Jack Neo’s *Ah Boys to Men* trilogy.

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Being “Very China:” Self-Consciousness and Identity Transformation

Abstract This chapter is an ethnography of a psychosocial experience of the PRC scholars revolving around the notion of being “very China,” an idiom that captures the intertwinement between their development of self-consciousness and their identity transformation. Indexing the undesirable embodied differences as well as educational subjectivities that some PRC scholars critically discover about themselves upon being reflected through the otherness of the local/Singaporean figure, “very China”-ness is a transient identity label, the negation of which marks the PRC scholars’ subjective expansion. Not only is this drama of “very China”-ness played out in the local-foreign relation, it also manifests in the “intra-ethnic othering” between the SM1/2/3 scholars. This chapter is a case of *how* exactly subjective transformations take place among international students.

Keywords Othering • Stereotyping • Discrimination • Identity • Self-consciousness • Chinese international students

International students are “often conscious of their own changing subjectivities, working critically using feedback from themselves (and others)” (Marginson, 2014, p. 14). This chapter is concerned with the ways in which *self-consciousness* of changing subjectivities and the use of feedback

from the *self* and *others* are central to the experiences of the PRC scholars on UIS campus. If the previous chapter has mainly focused on the formation of a stereotypical “other,” this chapter emphasizes self-formation and transformation. Yet, other-formation and self-(trans)formation are intimately connected. In the words of philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1992, p. 3), “the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other.” Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997, p. 21) similarly says, “Identity is a structured representation which only achieves its position through the narrow eyes of the negative. It has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself.”

In this chapter, I look closely at the mechanism by which self-other relations and tensions shape self-formation experiences for the PRC foreign talent scholars in Singapore. I do so by narrating a drama about being “very China.”

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The presence of foreign students increased significantly in Singaporean Universities from mid 2000s, causing some disquiet to arise from the local students. As a response, the authorities announced more recently to reduce the number of foreign undergraduates to 15% by 2015 (Davie, 2014). In spite of this, the impression that one gets on the ground is as if the percentage could be higher. Take a random tour in the UIS libraries during exam revision period, one is likely to see the study spaces occupied by groups of PRC students cramming over thick piles of lecture notes, with conversations spoken in the PRC style Mandarin not far out of one’s ear-shot. During the vacations, when local students have mostly left campus residence, a handful of canteens with authentic Chinese food—operated by caterers from China—will be visited almost exclusively by gangs of PRC students, creating the illusion that these might as well be university canteens in China.

Although official statistics are unavailable, at the undergraduate level, those from China make up one of the largest groups of foreign students at UIS. At the postgraduate level, it could be surmised with some confidence that those from China account for more than 40% of all research students; this is because in 2012 a rule was internally promulgated by UIS to require all academic faculties not to award more than 40% of their PhD studentships to candidates “from any single country.” Some of my

informants who were PhD students at UIS told me—probably with some exaggeration—that the *lingua franca* in some science/engineering labs had become Mandarin because many academic faculty members and most research students were from China.

The PRC students’ presence is felt as much because of their numbers as because of their difference. There are perhaps two notable stereotypes associated with the PRC students in the UIS campus; and, as is often with stereotypes, there is a ring of truth to them.

The first, as already dealt with in Chapter 4, consists in the PRC scholars’ studiousness and their perceived unsociability. Speaking of this subject, one of my field informants directed me to a short Youtube video clip apparently recorded by a Singaporean student at UIS. The video clip showed a big crowd waiting in front of the university’s central library before it opened at 8.30 in the morning. The videographer was recorded commenting in characteristic Singlish: “Aiya, must be those China scholar lah! No life one!” Indeed, being the successful products of their home-country education system, the PRC scholars on the whole embody highly conscientious attitudes toward bookish study and remarkable levels of self-discipline. The academic pressure they thus exert on the local students make the former’s swot behaviors generally unwelcome to the latter, though ironically this pressure is one of the explicit reasons why the Singapore government desires foreign talent students in the first place.

Aside from being library desk hoggers, PRC students are also stereotypically identified on the campus by their fashion sense and demeanor. At the risk of generalization and barring individual variations, PRC students are marked by their insistence on their Chinese fashion codes. Newly arrived boys, for example, are often seen wearing baggy T-shirts and tracksuits, the latter being a commonly-seen style of school uniform in China. Those who have been in Singapore for longer may have abandoned the tracksuit, but a perpetual pair of sports trainers, worn on most occasions, easily betrays their identity, especially when the trainers are of a nondescript Chinese brand.¹ Juxtaposed with their more fashion-conscious local peers, the PRC students’ untrendy appearances sometimes draw the judging eyes of the local students. As some of my PRC scholar informants would self-consciously say, their styles were kind of *tu*, or “earthy,” meaning untrendy or outdated.

Embodied styles or forms are subtle indexes for more deeply-seated sociocultural subjectivities. “The body [...] is a surface of social and cultural inscription; it houses subjectivity” (Longhurst, 2005, p. 52). Some—though surely not all—PRC scholars’ initially “earthy” appearances could be seen

as the embodied markers of their lingering belonging, if not attachment, to specific sociocultural or political regimes of subjectification that molded them into specific types of young persons. The widespread use of tracksuit-style school uniforms in China tends to shape a social preference for boys to wear plain, baggy T-shirts and sports trainers. In a similar vein, female Chinese students may wear “cute” or “beautiful,” but never “sexy” clothes. These rules evidence the Chinese educational regime’s construction of the ideal student as a sporty, energetic, “healthy” (*jiankang xiangshang*) figure with no frivolous vanity or morally questionable fashion statements. (It must be noted, however, as China rapidly becomes affluent and globalized in consumer culture, these stereotypes, which applied relatively readily to PRC scholars of the earlier years, e.g. late 1990s and early 2000s, became less and less sustainable in more recent time.)

In any case, when some of my PRC scholar informants—typically the ones who had been in Singapore for some time already—admitted in a tone of relaxed self-mockery that they used to wear “earthy” Chinese branded trainers and tracksuits, or to have exhibited some of the stereotypical features attributed to them, I saw it not as their legitimation of externally imposed discriminatory discourses, but instead as a case of their re-evaluation of the subjectivities they believed they used to embody. This re-evaluation is succinctly captured in the expression of being “very China,” or “*hen zhongguo*,” as a number of my informants put it. While not everybody used exactly such an expression, many informants shared more or less a vague sentiment to this effect.

In turn, the “very China” embodied appearances metonymize a broader range of social or behavioral manifestations of perceived “very China” subjectivities. This metonymic connection was illustrated in the following quote from a 26-year-old male ex-SM3 scholar, Da Wei, who had graduated three years before and was working for a European company at the time of our interview:

At that time I was really *very China* (*hen zhongguo*)! Now I look back at the photos taken at that time, I dressed just like peasants (*nongmin*)! It’s so *tu*. No wonder Singaporeans laughed at us [chuckles], ‘cause even I would laugh at myself! I guess we also behaved a bit like peasants, you know, speak very loudly, bad social manners and all...

Indeed, anything ranging from “bad” sartorial sense, to clumsy Chinese-accented English, to the lack of polish in social manners, could be reflected upon by the Chinese scholars in retrospect as “very China”-ness. It is

important to note how this discourse of "very China"-ness arises at the ambiguous conjuncture between an arguably insulting stereotypical imposition from the "other," and a somewhat embarrassing, if not self-chastising, moment of self-consciousness. The two following small vignettes provided by two informants illustrate respectively these two aspects.

Shuyi (F, 25), an ex-SM3 scholar who had graduated a year ago at the time of interview, vividly recalled an episode during her final year at university. At a career workshop on "impression management" conducted in a huge lecture hall attended by several hundred graduating students including Shuyi herself, the female Singaporean public relations guru conducting that workshop at one point commented on "my *friends* from *China* who suck their fingers when eating crabs," and used that as an example of disastrous impression management. Shuyi recalled how when she first heard this comment she frowned and got upset, especially at the way in which the guru stressed the word "China" in a tone of disdain. When the workshop was over, she joined her Chinese friends who also attended the workshop in complaining among themselves about that guru's insensitive remark.

Fu Di (M, 24), an SM1 scholar at the fourth and final year of his degree, had a story with a rather different gist to tell. During the campus recruitment talk hosted by a major American bank that Fu Di had attended not long ago, he was amazed at how a PRC student sitting in the front row shocked and amused the crowd by asking the first question in the Q&A session—"So how much is the salary?" This caused a wave of laughter across the large lecture hall in which the talk was held, and induced quite a few giggles from the senior American bankers at the podium. Fu Di recalled this little vignette with such animated disapproval as if that embarrassing moment indexing that Chinese student's lack of tact in communication had been his very own.

Such "very China" moments described by some of my informants may seem rather trivial at first, but I argue that this triviality belies something more significant. Namely, they are moments of *self-consciousness*—moments in which the subject becomes aware of itself through being reflected by/ in the "other." Such reflection may be prompted by the unjustified stereotyping imposed by an "other," or a self-initiated comparison with the "other," or anything in between; but regardless, the result is a heightened sense of self-awareness. People from China are naturally "very China" for that's the culture and environment they have come from; however, it is when immersed in a different sociocultural setting by virtue of their educational mobility, and thereby having encountered *otherness*, some PRC

scholars experience a self-consciousness in the form of a realization of their being “very China.”

For some, implicit in this self-consciousness is a desire to overcome the difference that caused the self-consciousness in the first place, especially when such self-consciousness is associated with embarrassment. This is borne out in concrete terms by the ways in which, for some of my informants, the negation of their “very China”-ness and therefore the achievement of identity (or sameness) with the “other” was sometimes spoken of as a desirable aim or celebrated outcome of their personal journeys. I met a number of informants who seemed to take being mistaken as Singaporean or not being recognized as Mainland Chinese as compliments. The informant who most explicitly instantiated this was perhaps Tong Mei, a 26-year-old female SM2 scholar who had graduated and been working for two years at the time of our interview. She remarked, intoning a sense of achievement:

In these few years of working life, people around me gave me the evaluation (*pingjia*) that I am not like a Mainland Chinese at all (*genben buxiang zhongguoren*). My English has improved a lot, and people actually can’t tell where I am from. Sometimes they mistake me for a Singaporean (*shuo wo shibushi xinjiapo ren a?*).

When I brought up this issue of “very China” self-perception to a wider range of interviewees, most of them could appreciate the experience, even though they might not feel equally strongly about it. However, there was no consensus as to what “very China”-ness involved. Some would vaguely say not being open-minded enough was a “very China” trait, while others were more specific. For example, one male informant mentioned that being too nationalistic and Sino-centric was something that he retrospectively regarded as “very China.” Still others referred to completely different and mundane matters such as fashion sense, lifestyle, and ways of carrying or conducting oneself in general.

Thus, being “very China” was “a kind of air” (*yizhong ganjue*)—as one informant put it—that was not necessarily understood in the same way by different informants. But what seemed to be the common logic underlying this discourse is the sense of an old self being overcome by a new and more desirable one. “Very China” or *hen zhongguo* was the expression used by some of my informants but not others; however, as an *emic* idiom capturing the sense of self-(trans)formation, it resonated with a far greater number of my informants. As I show below, this idiom seemed to be a convenient

device through which other PRC scholars at UIS narrated and made sense of their self-(trans)formative experiences. As an ethnographer and analyst, I appropriate the “very China” idiom *etically* to elucidate such experiences.

CRITICAL SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH “VERY CHINA”-NESS

Aspects such as manner, speech, gait, and fashion sense belong to the most superficial level on which the PRC scholars re-discover themselves through being reflected in otherness. As the scholars’ engagement with the locality deepens, other forms of *critical* self-consciousness emerges around the “very China” idiom. In this process, one instrumental figure of otherness is their local peer group of Singaporean students.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the typical local/Singaporean student at UIS, in the initially stereotyping eyes of not a small number of PRC scholars, is someone who is not very academically oriented, who tends to dedicate quite a portion of their university timetable to what the PRC scholars dismiss as “pointless” extra-curricular activities (ECA) or residential hall sports games, and who tends to finish course assignments at the last minute and complains endlessly about exams. One informant, Meng Yu (M, 19), an SM2 scholar in his second year studying Electrical and Electronic Engineering (EEE), bluntly remarked during our interview: “The first thing about local (students) that shocked me was how bad their mathematics were! For me, it’s quite unimaginably bad.”

Such belittling comments on local students based on exam-oriented academic aptitudes were sometimes exchanged among the UIS PRC scholar-freshers, though few initially seemed to realize a simple, obvious fact, namely that they enjoyed a considerable advantage over their engineering-majored local peers at UIS because they were selected by the Singaporean MOE precisely on their strengths in mathematics and science. Despite that such comments might have been casual remarks with no hurtful intentions, when slipped into the wrong ears, they could become a source of tension. In fieldwork, I once overheard a Singaporean male student making nasty remarks about a PRC scholar, apparently because the latter had walked out of an exam declaring an apparently tough paper to be a piece of cake.

However, this kind of hubris on the part of some PRC scholars can be short-lived. In fact, some informants told me about what they thought

they had learnt from the Singaporean students based on their observations of and interactions with them. Many PRC scholars in UIS came to acknowledge that although academically they might be ahead of the average local student, contrasting themselves with the locals also brought into relief what was *lacking* in themselves. There was a sense in which some PRC scholars saw the “other” figure as a mirror that reflected their own inadequacy. In this move, the PRC scholar who looks into the mirror becomes a subject of lack and an object of her own criticism. In other words, S/he desires a better self, inspired by the other.

Mainstream Chinese schooling is widely criticized for being exam-driven and for thus inculcating in students a concept of self-worth based largely on exam performances and paper qualifications (Kipnis, 2011a; Yu & Suen, 2005). Yoked with immense pressures to do well in exams and the parental “wishing for dragon children” (Wu & Singh, 2004), often students in China are given little time and few opportunities to explore freely their non-academic passions and interests. Many become pragmatists or utilitarians who care not so much what they do, but how well they do what they are given to do (see Chapter 2). What emerged from my field observations was that such insights were often the ones that PRC scholars become critically “awakened” to sooner or later, by virtue of their encounter with the Singaporean “other.” This self-critique, in turn, implies a desire to transcend their “very China” subjectivities.

Using the example of a Singaporean acquaintance who was a member in the Chinese Orchestra (*huayue tuan*) in UIS, Han (M, 19, second-year Bioengineering major, SM2) articulated this moment of simultaneous self-critique and “other”-desiring, as follows:

In China, we practice a musical instrument, and take exams to pass grades, don't we? We want to get Grade Ten [the highest grade], and get a certificate, and feel good about it. The local Singaporean music lovers don't care about qualifications at all, but their skills are much better than ours. They will get you Grade 15 or 20 in China, but they don't care!

I know one Singaporean guy, he loves playing *guzheng*, but I mean he loves it *genuinely*! I've never met anyone who loves an instrument so much, so *genuinely*! I really respect him. His GPA is rubbish, only one point something... not even two! He suspended his studies last year, but he doesn't really care! He spent his time playing *guzheng*, and has performed a lot in public concerts. This is called true passion! Many local students know what they enjoy, and they do it for that enjoyment.

Do we PRC students really know what we *genuinely* love? I don’t think so... We are just there for the scores, or titles: First Class honours, GPA 5.0, etc... Our education has taught us to be very utilitarian (*gongli*)! Sometimes I actually wish I could be truly passionate about something like that local guy, but that’s not in my bones (*guzili meiyou*), I don’t think I can break free from our mode of thinking...

Significantly, whether Singaporean students indeed embody a non-instrumentalist attitude to education or whether the exaggerating tones employed by Han are justifiable is less important than the striking way in which he passionately criticized himself and other PRC scholars via the device of the “other” figure. The Singaporean acquaintance Han spoke of could well be an exceptional case among local students, but it was interesting to see how Han interpreted his observation of this local “other” through the categories of nationality and nationally-conditioned sociocultural and educational subjectivities.

In fact, such discourse of self-criticism extended beyond the academic realm, and into the extra-curricular aspects of campus life for some of my informants. I mentioned in the previous chapter that the ECA “scene” in UIS could be a problematic terrain for the PRC scholars to navigate due to sociocultural differences. It should be pointed out that, compared with their seniors in earlier scholarship cohorts, PRC scholars of more recent years have become notably more socially ambitious and active. Yet, while this gradual change goes some way toward dispelling the stereotypical image of Chinese students as anti-social “swots,” which is part of the “very China” image, some informants nevertheless critically reflected on certain incipient patterns or characteristics of the PRC scholars’ participation in ECA that may be regarded as “very China” in some other way.

Because PRC students typically find it hard to break into those ECA organizations dominated by Singaporean students, they tend to join organizations where there were already significant numbers of other PRC students, or simply to establish their own clubs. This was not just the case with the PRC Student Union (PRCSU) in UIS, which naturally had an exclusive PRC student membership, but it also applied to some other university-wide ECA clubs and societies. For example, the “UIS Chinese Society,” a cultural activities club which promotes Chinese culture and arts (such as calligraphy, traditional Chinese music and so on) used to be mainly run by Malaysian Chinese students several years ago; by the time of my 2011–12 fieldwork, this club had been “occupied” (“*zhanling*”—as one of my informant put it) by the Mainland Chinese students. The EEC

(Electrical and Electronic Engineering) Club is dominated by Chinese students thanks to the high percentage of PRC students in the school. Even a recently founded “UIS French Society” was essentially run by PRC students, with few members of other nationalities.

As PRC students naturally find it more comfortable to work with other PRC students, when it comes to recruitment, ECA leaders (main committee members or “main comm”) who are from the PRC tend to favor other PRC students for cadre positions (“sub comm”). According to a cynical point of view voiced by some informants, *guanxi*, or favoritism based on personal connection, becomes a feature of the ECA organizations dominated by PRC students. Since the points a student earned through ECA participation affected their chances of getting a campus accommodation of choice, there was indeed a favor to be spoken of.²

This arrival of the PRC students on UIS’s ECA scene in an incipiently segregated way was reflected upon by some of my informants in the idiom of “very China”-ness. Chinese student ECA cadres who got their positions because of their friendship with the leaders of the ECA organization call themselves “*hunfen de*,” or free riders. Although it had not been possible for me to study any PRC student-dominated ECA organizations during the fieldwork, several informants commented that “*China-style*” (*zhongguo shi de*) student politics—whatever that might mean—often take place in such organizations.

In any case, due to language barriers and cultural discomfort, Singaporean and other international students in UIS tend to avoid joining these PRC-dominated ECA clubs and societies, furthering the awkward ethnic and cultural self-sorting. Even those PRC scholars who were themselves in such ECA organizations claimed that they regretted this fact because they believed that ECAs should be about forging cross-cultural communication. Ironically, in reality they could not deny that it was simply more comfortable to “hang around with one’s own kind” (*he zijiren wan’r*).

Regarding these issues, a second year SM2 scholar, Yin Le (F, 19), who used to be very active in the ECAs during her previous academic year, made the following remarks:

You see, every ECA club now in UIS is full of PRC students. But PRC students join ECA clubs for the wrong reasons. They join for two reasons: to earn the ECA points so that you get to live in halls, and to have some shining titles to put on your CV. Like, “I’m the President of blah blah Club, or the VP [vice president] of whatever Society...” Sounds good right? But I think the local students are really doing the activities for the sake of fun and

the benefit of the members. That’s why they can get very “high” in doing these activities. They *enjoy* the ECAs. For PRC students, we can get the positions and get the jobs done, but we are not really enjoying, because we have ulterior motives (*mudi buchun*).

To Yin Le, Chinese scholars’ instrumentalist attitude toward ECA activities and their “passion”-less excellence in doing them is another “very China” trait—indeed, an extension of the instrumentalist or utilitarian attitudes Chinese students apply to academic study. Maybe the PRC scholar could no longer be simplistically reduced to the antisocial swot figure, but the self-criticism that emerged from my informants’ such self-examining reflections was that the PRC scholars applied their typically Chinese mentality to see ECA as the opportunity to create “well-rounded” personal biographies—as reflected in a CV with not just a high GPA score but also various ECA achievements—instead of as something simply to be enjoyed for its own sake. By contrasting the Chinese students’ typical mentalities toward ECA with the local Singaporean students’ perceived genuineness, passion, and proper motives, the self-critical discourses of the PRC scholars suggest a latent desire to transcend their “very China”-ness and to incorporate into themselves the strengths they saw in the “other.”

As these instances from both the academic and extra-curricular aspects of UIS campus life illustrate, the Singaporean student plays an important role in PRC scholars’ development of critical self-consciousness. Their perception of the local “other” seemed to shift from a narrow focus on the latter’s relative academic weakness to a broader vision inclusive of those other characteristics, whether justifiably attributed to the “other” or not, that the PRC scholars found commendable and useful in highlighting their own shortcomings. This shift, arguably, can be interpreted as a process of subjective expansion whereby the PRC scholars’ former value system with its exclusive premium on academic competence is replaced or, at least, complemented by a wider range of parameters for judging the social worth and desirability of themselves as well as the “other.”

“VERY CHINA”-NESS AMONG SUB-GROUPS OF PRC SCHOLARS

The “very China”-themed psychosocial processes of critiquing and othering were not just played out between the PRC scholars and their local/Singaporean “other.” Similar to what Nancy Abelmann (2009) has called

“intra-ethnic othering” or what Gu (2011) has similarly termed “in-group otherization,” the “very China” drama was sometimes also enacted among the three sub-types of PRC scholars—SM1/2/3.

As a rule, the SM3 scholars were generally considered to be “more China” than the SM2, and both groups were to some extent aware of a subtle identity differentiation between them. Two significant differences between the SM2 and SM3 schemes help explain this divide. Firstly, because SM2 scholars are recruited to Singapore at senior middle school grade two, they have managed to avoid taking the notoriously competitive *Gaokao*; in contrast, virtually all SM3 scholars are *Gaokao* survivors, except for the very few who had been exempted. Secondly, in terms of socio-economic background, the SM2 scholars, by virtue of being recruited mostly from China’s provincial capital cities, tend to come from a relatively homogenous urban middle-class social stratum (see Chapter 3); the SM3 scholars, on the other hand, hail from a wider socioeconomic spectrum because they are selected from the Chinese universities where they studied, which were not necessarily located in their places of origin. Although it was not possible for me to obtain any meaningful statistics in the absence of official patronage, fieldwork has convinced me that the great majority of SM2 scholars’ parents are urban middle-class professionals whereas this is somewhat less the case for the SM3 scholars.

Hence, when it comes to “very China”-ness, the SM3 scholars were believed to exhibit more such traits than their SM2 peers did—a fact that some of my SM2 informants held onto in order to subject their SM3 counterparts to tongue-in-cheek mockery. Among a small group of second year SM2 scholars with whom I chatted casually, everyone assured me: “We can tell that someone is an SM3 by just one glance!” When I inquired as to how, one young man among them pointed to what he called—in jest I was quite sure—the SM3 scholars’ “time-beaten-ness” (*cangsang gan*) due to having gone through the *Gaokao* ordeal. Furthermore, one of this group of SM2 informants told me that he had not so far even exchanged a single word with the SM3 scholars in his course because “These SM3 give you the impression that when you talk to them you’re wasting a few precious seconds that they could otherwise spend on reading lecture notes.” Later on, in a one-to-one interview, this SM2 interviewee talked somewhat proudly about his friendship with Singaporean students, evidenced by his having been invited to join them in a leisure trip to Malaysia. “Many SM3 students get through four years of university without making a single local friend; that’s not my way of life,” he added.

Despite these SM2 informants’ conscious or subconscious effort to set themselves apart from the “more China” SM3 scholars, in the eyes of the handful of SM1 scholars I talked to, however, SM2 and SM3 were largely of the same hue, once again defined in terms of “very China”-ness. SM1 scholars normally arrive in Singapore around the age of 15, and study in local secondary schools through to Junior Colleges before university matriculation (see Chapter 2). By the time they reached university, many already sport a Singlish accent, in addition to their familiarity with the local cultural sensibilities and lifestyle. When asked, SM1 informant Fu Di told me that he thought the difference between SM1 and SM2/3 was an “ideological” (*yishi xingtai*) one. He explained to me in the following terms:

It’s about worldviews and philosophies of life, I guess. The SM2 and 3 are relatively rigid (*bijiao siban*) in their mind, and are too fixated on exam results. They don’t seem to socialize very much—some of them get through undergrad without making friends outside their small PRC circles. [...] They study very hard, but I don’t think they ever asked themselves *why* they study. [...] They don’t seem to have very clear visions of their own—that’s why they flock to apply to the banks when graduate; quite a lot also stay on to study for PhD, not because they have passion for research, but because they don’t know what else to do. They just apply to the most prestigious universities to study for PhD, because that’s what they’ve been told to do all their lives. They are still caught in a “very China” mode of thinking (*ben zhongguo de siwei moshi*).

Such impressions about SM2/3 scholars perhaps also contained some stereotypical truths. However, the crucial point I wish to make here is something else: SM1 scholars like Fu Di might assume the SM2/3 scholars to be unselfconsciously “very China,” whereas this “very China”-ness is exactly what many SM2/3 scholars recognize in themselves and struggle with, as earlier parts of this chapter show. In this specific case, the “very China”-ness signified particular sets of attitudes or mentalities pertaining to education; but, as an *abstract idiom* what “very China”-ness essentially signifies is the undesirability of certain self-perceived subjectivities or identity characteristics. In other words, it is an identity category, and a tool in boundary work. Self-formation in the process of international study-sojourn commonly involves the subjects replacing what were thought to be undesirable or less desirable selves with what are believed to be more “mature” and more “well-rounded” ones. This is the reason why, even though

“very China”-ness was never a very concrete or precise concept, it found resonance with many of my informants. The abstract personal transformative experience is in one way or another common to all the PRC scholars, and indeed international students in general.

THE CLOSURE OF THE “VERY CHINA” DRAMA

What this “very China” drama captures is an experience in which the PRC scholars first become aware of their limitations and then, by desiring the “other” and learning from the “other,” transcend those limitations. In other words, “very China”-ness is an idiom useful only to the extent that it is eventually negated. Indeed, this is why in my informants’ narratives, being “very China” was usually spoken of in the past tense or attributed to others. On the few occasions in which it was used in the present tense and as a self-criticism, an anxiety or desire for change is usually implied.

The occasional essentialising and self-orientalising tones in which some of my PRC scholar informants narrated their “very China” dramas betray the *intensity of desire* that could be involved in the process of self-formation amidst international educational mobility and cross-cultural contact. But this desire can be a transient one, and it seemed that my informants realized that “very China”-ness became a crude identity label and unhelpful category when it is allowed to outlast its “best-before date.” Typically, it was the scholars in the lower undergraduate years who were more vocal and enthusiastic in their use of this idiom amidst angst-ridden narratives; but when I interviewed and interacted with scholars who had graduated and entered professional life in Singapore for two or three years, the majority of them responded lukewarmly to my interests in their politics of identity. As one such informant politely hinted to me during an interview, my “fixation”—he put it to such an effect—on identities was somewhat misplaced. In other words, they have left behind the type of immature identity politics that the “very China” drama exemplified. For them, those differentiations among the SM1/2/3 PRC scholars gradually fade and lose significance. Even the instrumental importance they once attached to the “other” figure of the Singaporean while they were undergraduate students now becomes by and large obsolete.

This, I hasten to add, is not to suggest that identity/identification no longer matters for the PRC foreign talent once they have settled in

Singapore for some time. Arguably, self-identity and belonging are always important to human beings’ social existence. But as the *desire* underpinning identity politics moves on, so do the foci of identity politics. The arguably naïve desire underpinning the “very China” identity discourses arose out of the younger PRC scholars’ fresh contact with otherness in the context of a Singaporean university campus. When this desire has been satisfied and negated through their self-(trans)formation, as I have depicted in this chapter, the “very China” drama as a psychosocial process meets its closure.

* * *

As with Chapter 4, this chapter has been about self-other perception, judgment, and stereotyping, and the ways in which these psychosocial dynamics and affects are entangled with desire or arise out of desire. In contrast to the more controversial and problematic aspects of desiring that are highlighted in Chapter 4, however, this chapter emphasizes the generative aspect of educational desire. Desire propels the subject to move beyond the *status quo*, to transform, to become “better.” In the words of Hegelian philosopher Yirmiyahu Yovel (2005, p. 98), “to be a subject is to transcend every partial, immediate identity, and to go beyond any given state.”

NOTES

1. This observation was based on fieldwork that is by now somewhat dated. Nevertheless, the fact that Chinese students are often marked by a subtly different sartorial sensibility remains.
2. In an article on Singapore society’s anxieties over foreign talent, Aaron Koh (2003, p. 244, emphases added) pointed out how it was perceived that foreign talent possessed the “*hegemonic potential* to define their cultural space and positioning in the terrain of Singapore’s ethnoscape.” In the microcosmic space of the UIS campus, these Chinese student-dominated ECA organizations—few as they might be in number—arguably conjure up this anxiety over the hegemonic potentials of the PRC foreign talent. But it must be pointed out that this phenomenon could alternatively be interpreted as these international students’ agentic act of claiming and creating spaces of their own amidst real or perceived marginalization and exclusion (see Robertson, 2013a).

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Desiring an Education: Scholarly Idealism and Anti-scholarly Entrepreneurialism

Abstract This final chapter looks at how the PRC scholars experienced and perceived the UIS education, and how their educational desires are met with frustration, disillusionment and/or transformation as a consequence. While the scholars had a variety of experiences and expressed a wide range of views, by and large these seem to lie on a spectrum defined on the two ends by what I venture to call a *scholarly idealism* on the one hand and an *anti-scholarly entrepreneurialism* on the other. The scholarly idealism stems from the PRC scholars' Chinese educational subjectivity and manifests in their discontent against the overwhelming pragmatism of higher education in UIS/Singapore. Anti-scholarly entrepreneurialism seems to develop from the very disillusionment of this idealism, and it manifests in a militantly anti-scholarly discourse or attitude that devalues academic learning.

Keywords Educational desire • Scholarly idealism • Anti-scholarly entrepreneurialism • Higher education pedagogy • Chinese international students • Singapore

The previous two chapters examined the PRC scholars' sociocultural encounters with otherness in the context of University Institute Singapore (UIS) campus life. In this last chapter, I focus on how the PRC scholars experienced

and perceived the pedagogical culture at UIS. Here, then, the UIS pedagogical milieu constituted an “other” with which the PRC scholars engaged or disengaged in particular ways, involving various attitudes and affects.

An ambitious university aspiring to global status in today’s world, such as Singapore’s UIS, typically claims to develop in students a specific set of capacities, skills, and ethos. However, these may not always be seamlessly compatible with one another; for example, academic excellence is always valued, but extra-curricular activities are equally emphasized as a way to develop students’ social intelligence and skills such as leadership and interpersonal communication. Excellence in pure research is highly prized, but so is entrepreneurialism, which encourages the students to become “doers” in the real world. Ask any PRC scholar about their views on the meaning or purpose of an undergraduate education and how they felt UIS succeeded or failed to deliver in accordance, their answers are bound to be a heteroglossia of discourses, imaginaries and reflexive narratives. In this chapter, I examine some of these discourses, imaginaries and narratives, and the ways in which they are fraught with tension, ambivalence, and self-contradiction.

It needs to be acknowledged from the outset, however, that this chapter is not a study of higher education pedagogy from an educationalist’s perspective, which would entail a different research strategy that goes beyond the scope of my project. My focus is instead on the PRC scholars’ expectations and desires in relation to higher education, and how such expectations and desires are fulfilled, or frustrated, or transformed in their educational experiences at UIS, Singapore.

My PRC scholar informants at UIS studied in a variety of science or engineering disciplines, ranging from the “purest” of sciences such Mathematics and Physics to more profession-oriented ones such as Maritime Studies. The ethnographic interviews I held with them elicited their *general* reflections on the undergraduate education they underwent or were undergoing. Although there naturally were variations in the views and voices offered by different informants, these variations did not seem to me to bear strong correlations with their specific subject disciplines, but instead suggested a general pattern of polarity across the board between what I call a *scholarly idealism* and an *anti-scholarly entrepreneurialism*. Between these two poles is a spectrum of educational experiences the PRC scholars’ had with UIS as a Singaporean higher education institution.

DISCONTENT AND DESIRE: SCHOLARLY IDEALISM

As discussed at length in Chapters 4 and 5, campus culture and life present the PRC scholars with multifarious challenges and opportunities for self-development and personal transformation. Participating in myriad kinds of extra-curricular activities (ECA), notwithstanding certain issues and troubles, nevertheless afforded them opportunities to “train” (*duanlian*) in a variety of useful skills and capacities such as leadership, organization, task co-ordination, interpersonal and public communication, self-presentation and so forth. Nearly every informant I interviewed appreciated to some degree what they thought they had learned from participating in the campus ECAs.

Within the university academic curricula proper, informants also showed appreciation for the “practical” skills that they have been trained in. These “practical” skills generally referred to those non-discipline-specific “generic skills” (Crebert et al. 2007) that university students are supposed to obtain through their studies. The following comment from SM2 scholar Zhou Peng (M, 23), a final-year engineer, illustrates this:

UIS has taught us a lot of practical stuff, useful stuff. It's like equipping us with advanced weapons. These weapons help us smoothly blend into the business culture (*shangye wenhua*) of the local society and labor market. For example, how to make presentations in front of people, how to carry out a project, how to teamwork with other people, how to write an impressive résumé, how to do professional networking, how to do job-hunting...and so on. These are very practical stuff, *decorative* (*baozhuang xingde*) stuff. They transform us from naïve kids into professionals.

In a group interview with three final-year SM3 scholars majoring in Electrical and Electronic Engineering, they also mentioned that the compulsory Professional Communication course they were taking that semester was—despite being somewhat “boring”—useful in preparing them for their impending job hunting endeavors.

As much as the PRC scholars acknowledged with approval the practical aspect of the UIS education, however, it was also exactly this perceived pragmatism of the university pedagogical culture that constituted a focal point of discontent and criticism for some. Informant Zhou Peng's use of the term “decorative” to describe his educational experience alluded to what he thought as a lack of intellectual depth or

substance, which he subsequently spoke about more explicitly. Through talking to a wide range of informants, I realized that such a critical view, far from being idiosyncratic, in fact turned out to be a shared perception among a significant number of PRC scholars.

Too “Practical”

When asked to reflect on what he was not satisfied with about his undergraduate experience, the engineering finalist Zhou Peng simply turned to the negative side of the pragmatism of the UIS education, and remarked:

A business culture dominates the UIS campus. I’m not sure whether this is just UIS or it’s Singapore at large, but the air is saturated with a business culture (*chongchi zhe shangye wenhua*). It makes students worry about their future career and job-seeking from the very start. So, instead of learning things, we are always worrying about things.

In my interview with Shan Shan (F, 20), a second-year SM2 scholar majoring in Material Science and Engineering, I asked her whether she felt the UIS environment shaped or guided her development of character or worldviews; similar to Zhou Peng, she made a critical point about the overwhelming pragmatism of the UIS education:

I don’t think there is much of a “guidance”—certainly not like the universities back in China where they still pretend to study Marxism and Mao Zedong Thought; if there is any guidance, then I guess the message is: graduate and get a good job. That’s it.

While Shan Shan wasn’t at all approving of the fact that anachronistic ideologies such as Marxism and Mao Zedong Thought were still taught in universities in China in the name of moral and political education, nor was she entirely happy with the downright pragmatic culture in which UIS immersed its students. There was a sense in which she felt that the aim of attending university should be about something more elevated than just getting a job and earning a salary.

Zhou Peng and Shan Shan, by showing a dissenting attitude against what they perceived to be an overly pragmatic university education, were perhaps implicitly challenging the “hegemonic skills and employability dis-

courses” (Henderson, 2014, p. 2) of contemporary higher education with latently *idealistic* imaginaries of university education. This vague idealism, or at least a *discourse* of idealism, as I discovered, was not uncommon among the PRC scholars. The following are some further illustrations of this idealistic desire for education.

Not “Intellectual” Enough

One such discourse involved a desire, explicit or implicit, for an intellectual or “humanistic” (*renwen*) quality to undergraduate education, which the PRC scholars believed to be lacking in the UIS milieu.

For instance, second-year SM3 engineering scholar Huang Fei (M, 21) told me that he had a general and “vague” (*menglong de*) interest in the humanities and social science disciplines, yet he felt that the university system did not encourage his dabbling in those disciplines:

The way the academic system is designed does not encourage you to study beyond your chosen discipline. We are scholars, we have to keep high GPAs (Grade Points Average), and we want to get a good Honours degree, so we dare not to choose those elective modules outside our specialization. To ensure good GPA, students tend to choose those subjects which they are already good at; this way you don’t get enough exposure to a broader perspective.

Fu Di, a final-year Maritime Studies major and SM1 scholar, echoed Huang Fei on this point when he mentioned, “I would like to be able to take a course in the history of Chinese literature, but this kind of course is not there.” I asked him why he would be interested in the history of Chinese literature given that he majored in Maritime Studies, a very profession-oriented specialization at UIS, and he replied that he thought university should not be about specialist training, but should be a broad “humanistic cultivation” (*renwen de xinyang*). He continued to say that there was not enough of a “humanistic atmosphere” (*renwen qixi*) at UIS. His imagination of the university culture in the “West” (*xifang*), as he described it to me, came across as a rather romanticized vision: the students smoke cigarettes, drink, and explore dreams and ambitions together...which he saw as the diametric opposite to UIS, where students were just narrow-mindedly fixated on getting good exam results, good internships and, afterwards, good jobs. He added that, in his observation,

UIS students in general did not show much interest in social issues and current affairs, which he saw as further evidence of the lack of a culture of intellectual engagement in the university.

This desire for intellectual breadth and humanistic ethos exemplified in Huang Fei's and Fu Di's comments seems to be informed by a classic vision in which the purpose of university education is idealistically understood to be the cultivation of a "general intellect" as opposed to the training in specialized knowledge.¹

On the other hand, influences from a related but intricately differentiated idealist vision about the university, as a place purely for the pursuit of knowledge,² were also detectable in some of my informants' voices, particularly through the ways in which their imaginations converged upon the notion of *passion* (*requing* or *jiquing*). According to some of my informants, being educated at UIS involved little scholarly or intellectual passion.

Not "Passionate" Enough

Most of the time we are just memorizing. Our mode of study is: in the classroom, the teacher tells you what is correct, you remember it, and then in the exam hall, you tell the teacher what is correct [on the exam paper]. You don't really get to *think* (*sikao*) very much studying this way. Sometimes I discuss with my course-mates and friends: "Is university education supposed to be like this? Isn't university supposed to be a place where there are heated debates, which ignite *sparks of thoughts* (*sixiang de huohua*)?" [...] Instead of passively receiving information, I wish there was a kind of interaction, a sense of intellectual discovery (*zhishi shang de tansuo*).

This was how Wen Shu (F, 20), an SM2 scholar at the second year of her degree course in Maritime Studies, described the education she was receiving. Her criticism of the rote learning style she encountered illustrated a desire to move beyond a surface learning approach to a deep learning approach that should ideally involve genuine thoughtful engagement and intellectual discovery (Gow & Kember, 1990). Deep learning implies a certain sense of devotion and passion, which is reflected in Wen Shu's use of the expression "sparks of thoughts (*sixiang de huohua*).” Indeed, the

lack of passion was a theme echoed by quite a few others when I asked them about their educational experience.

Gao Mei (F, 18) was a first-year Mathematical Sciences major and an SM2 scholar who at the time of interview had just begun her first semester in university for a few months. Her views could perhaps be taken as to some extent representative of the fresh impression that PRC scholar-freshers might develop when they first started their undergraduate studies. She spoke in a tone middling between puzzlement and dissatisfaction:

Universities in Singapore seem kind of “watery” (*haoxiang man shui de*). People [students] only study just before the final exams. They aren’t very serious about study here; they just want to “get by” (*hun*). Few people pursue PhD after undergraduate also, so there is not a strong academic atmosphere (*xuexi qifen bu nong*). [...] When it comes to reading textbooks, nobody seems to read it seriously, page by page, like we used to do back in high school. It’s just not very serious (*butai renzhen*), not very academic (*bushi hen xueshu*).

Ou Ping was a 26-year-old ex-SM2 scholar who studied Biological Sciences at UIS between 2004 and 2008. She recalled and commented on her undergraduate experience as follows:

By right, there should be a kind of *esprit de corps* (*zhitong daohe de ganjue*) among students of the same major: we would be constantly talking about our visions: vision for the society, for our discipline, for our field... We should develop a perspective of our own, about how our discipline is situated in the society... By right we should be making a lot of “comrades.” But no, I didn’t have many friends, just a few fellow Chinese scholars. Only with these few Chinese friends could I talk a bit about study; there was not much interaction with other students in the course at all. [...] Have you ever heard in UIS that some students have come together to form a reading group or study group?—a group where a few people who share the same passion study together and climb the summit of knowledge (*pandeng zhishi gaofeng*)...that kind of feeling, you know... No! I think in universities back in China you have these kinds of things.

While most informants who voiced a discontent about the lack of “passion” in studying at UIS stopped at making this comment in a general

way with a vague sense of resignation, a few others, like Wen Shu, Zhou Peng and Shan Shan whom I quoted earlier, went slightly further in trying to figure out why this was the case. The pragmatic ethos prevailing in the university was certainly believed to have played a role, but some also pointed their fingers at the academic faulty members at UIS—their failure to incite in students the passion for knowledge through good teaching. Typical comments in this vein included that the lectures were boring, superficial, and packed with too many “dead” (*si de*) facts and too little to trigger deep thinking from the students; or that the lecturers were not interactive enough or not themselves “passionate” about the things they were teaching.

Interestingly, in the fieldwork I encountered no less than a dozen undergraduate PRC scholars who claimed to be fans of various massive open online courses (MOOCs) offered by prestigious American universities. As long as they had a computer and Internet connection, which they all had, they could in the comfort of their own dorm rooms watch recordings of lectures delivered by world-renowned academics on topics that interested them, at virtually zero cost. Indeed, three undergraduate informants who did not know each other mentioned to me on separate occasions that they had enjoyed an Introduction to Psychology lecture series on the Open Yale Courses online! These informants who had tried out such MOOCs typically spoke of the American “profs” with adulation—they were engaging, humorous, passionate about their own fields, and could make the students engaged learners too.

When these PRC scholars criticized the UIS education for being not “passionate” enough, I noticed, their criticism was typically expressed in a tone of grouching, accompanied by the occasional sighs. While it was certainly true that as students they were powerless to change what they found dissatisfying in their university education, this very powerlessness perhaps also conveniently made it seem legitimate for them to put the blame on the “system.” It seemed to me that the PRC scholars’ discontent about their “passion”-less educational experience must be read in a more complex way: it was not just their complaint about the university’s pedagogical culture and milieu; underneath it was also a criticism of themselves for failing to be “passionate” students, which is a normative ideal rooted in their scholarly and educational subjectivity. Locating the cause of their “passion”-less education in an impersonal system beyond their control absolves their own possible responsibilities. As I already

discussed in Chapter 5, some PRC scholars indeed accused themselves of being instrumentalists and pragmatists who studied without passion; thus, their complaint now about the university being too pragmatic and passionless was both an echo of their self-criticism and perhaps also a way to shift the blame. In other words, the picture was subtler than simply a bunch of idealistic and passionate scholars being failed by the university they attended.

Second-year Electrical and Electronic Engineering (EEE) major Meng Yu, a 19-year-old SM2 scholar, told me in interview that it was “okay” for him to study EEE, but he did not feel the passion. He then remarked:

My father once told me something: “You have to passionately devote to something, before you can actually achieve anything in it (*ren bi you chi, ranhou you cheng*).” I think it’s absolutely true. Right now I don’t feel that kind of passion in what I study.

Although Meng Yu sounded completely matter-of-fact when he said this, from a psychoanalytic perspective, one might say that the “Word of the Father” shaped Meng Yu’s educational desire—in this case a desire to achieve something great by first being passionately devoted to it. As I have also argued in various places in Chapters 2, 4 and 5, Mainland Chinese students’ education normalizes their desires through the compulsory recitation of an idealistic and ideologized rhetorical repertoire. The latter time and again crops up in their subsequent sociocultural and educational experiences abroad, and inflects and frames their interpretations of such experiences. In regard to their discontent about the “too practical,” “not intellectual enough,” and “not passionate enough” education at UIS, a similar argument could be made. Wen Shu’s desire for “sparks of thoughts” and “intellectual discovery,” and Ou Ping’s desire for the “comradely spirit” shared by scholars who climb the “summit of knowledge” are perhaps the most explicit instantiations of such ideologized, idealistic, even *stylized* scholarly and educational desires. The impossibility to satisfy the command and the desire imposed by the Other (that of the Chinese educational system or, in Meng Yu’s case, also that of his father’s) makes it necessary to displace the responsibility onto an abstract, impersonal “system.” Conjuring up the image of the passionate American professors in world-leading universities or the imaginary of university students in China who still “climb the summit of knowledge,” the PRC

scholars resorted to the excuse that they were in the “wrong place”—the wrong country and/or the wrong university.

Mismatches of Desires

As I started to wrap my head around this set of discourse of discontent in fieldwork, a revealing moment came during an interview with Shan Shan, the second-year Material Sciences and Engineering major and SM2 scholar from Sichuan Province. Unlike the majority of my informants whom I sought out, Shan Shan actually contacted me on her own initiative to volunteer to be interviewed. She had heard about me and my research from a friend of hers whom I interviewed earlier. When we met at a campus café and sat down, she first said that she thought she *must* meet “this educational researcher from Oxford,” because to study in the Harvard Graduate School of Education (GSE) had been her dream for quite some time. During a summer vacation camp she took part in at the end of senior middle school grade one, Shan Shan visited some poverty-stricken ethnic minority rural areas in China’s southwestern region. She was appalled at the state of education there. Since then, the idea of doing something about education in China germinated, and she felt attending Harvard GSE might give her the right qualifications and knowledge to do just that. Although she was only at her second year when we met, she was already thinking that after graduation and serving the six-year bond in Singapore, she would apply to Harvard GSE. I asked her, how she ended up studying Material Science and Engineering at UIS on Singapore’s SM2 foreign talent program, given that her interests seemed to be in education; she conceded that getting a full scholarship to study in Singapore was simply too great an opportunity to pass up, but she was not at all happy with what she’s doing now. She felt no passion. Particularly, concerning her choice of major, she said:

I’m not at all interested in Material Science! I should be studying the humanities and social sciences! I was never passionate about maths, physics and chemistry [“*shu-li-hua*”—as these subjects are known in combined abbreviation in Chinese] when I was in high school. So I wanted to choose a university major which is broad but not too specialized, otherwise I would find it difficult to cope. Material science has relatively less mathematics and calculation in it, so I chose it.

Shan Shan's "confession" revealed something important underlying the sentiments of discontent that I encountered among the PRC scholars, namely: accounting for their niggling dissatisfactions and disaffections were various mismatches or compromises of educational desires.

In Shan Shan's case, the mismatch was between her "true" academic passion as she gradually discovered or developed it over time and the Singapore government's desire to recruit and train PRC foreign talent in the engineering and science fields. In the official version of things, Singapore authorities desire scientists and engineers in order to power up the island-nation's knowledge-based economy. But as many PRC scholars believed, correctly if also cynically, they were recruited also because many engineering and science faculties in Singapore's higher education institutions simply could no longer fill their places with enough qualified local students. The most academically capable local students tend either to go to prestigious Anglo-American universities—if they could afford these schools or get scholarships—or to choose lucrative fields such as business, law, and medicine. By recruiting scholars from the science stream (*li'ke*) in Chinese senior middle schools, it might have appeared to Singaporean authorities that a perfect match of desires could be forged: Singapore would get the science and engineering talent it wants, and budding Chinese scientists and engineers could obtain free education in the disciplines they are enthusiastic about.

In reality, however, there are many students in China like Shan Shan who chose the science stream not out of interest but out of pragmatism because of a hegemonic perception that there is "no future" in studying the humanities and social sciences (*wenke*). This belief is perhaps even vindicated when the Chinese students encountered Singapore's SM2/3 schemes as opportunities that were effectively only eligible for science stream students. The privilege of studying on full funding in internationally acclaimed Singaporean universities certainly induced some PRC scholars to compromise their passion for practicality. Although in absolute numerical terms such "reluctant" or "compromise" scholars might be in the minority, in the fieldwork I encountered no shortage of PRC scholars who said if they were given free choice they would be studying something else: I met Civil Engineering students who would rather study architecture and design; Biological Sciences students who would prefer studying traditional Chinese medicine; Maritime students who chose it in order to avoid too much engineering and maths works; and Electrical and

Electronic Engineering students who settled for this most versatile major simply because they were unsure what they were really interested in. In view of these partially fulfilled or unfulfilled educational desires, some of the discourses I presented earlier made better sense.

Indeed, over the years, there have been a number of scholars who decided to drop out of the scholarship schemes after they realized that they were not suited to study the subjects they were expected to. Heng (M, 19), a first-year fresher, who asked me not to disclose his personal information, said he was contemplating dropping out. A young man of artistic bent, Heng loved drawing and wanted to become professional in it, even though under parents' pressure he studied in the science stream in school and ended up getting an SM2 scholarship. He told me that he heard the "legendary" tale that an SM2 senior a year before him quit and returned to China during the "bridging course" because he realized his interest was really in music, and he decided that he could not handle all the science and math required of the scholars. Heng spoke of this SM2 senior with approval and admiration, although he was agonizing over whether he should take such a drastic step.

In 2011, the newly founded Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) became the third designated destination for the SM2 scholars. Among the dozens of scholars assigned by the MOE to this new institution to join its inaugural cohort, several decided to quit the SM2 program altogether and return to China to resume preparation for *Gaokao*. To them and their parents, this newborn university, despite all its potentials and strengths, simply seemed too risky an option. They worried that they would be the pedagogical white rats for an institution that was still experimenting its ways, and, worse still, that they would graduate in four years with a degree from a not well-recognized university. This just shows another case of mismatch between the scholars' own educational desires and expectations on the one hand, and the desires and designs of the Singaporean authorities on the other.

* * *

The university in the era of late capitalism and globalization is a "multiversity" (Shore, 2010) onto which a diverse range of stakeholders and interested parties—the nation-states, the market economy, the individual members of society—project their own plans, designs, desires, and fanta-

sies. Animated by a multiplicity of ideologies (such as the foreign talent policies in Singapore) and idea(lism)s (such as the PRC scholars' purist imaginations of university education), these plans, designs, desires and fantasies fly in different directions, with their trajectories cross-cutting one another. If the intersection points of these lines represent the moments in which these desires are matched, then the much more conspicuous interstitial spaces trapped in between the lines perhaps indicate the more frequent occurrence of mismatches and disjunctures of desires. The ambivalence and discontent some PRC scholars at UIS voiced regarding their undergraduate education should perhaps be understood in terms of such incongruous aspirations.

ANTI-SCHOLARLY ENTREPRENEURIALISM

However, it would be misleading to characterize all the PRC scholars at UIS as scholarly subjects harboring idealistic educational desires and imaginations. In fact, in field observations and interviews, I frequently encountered a countervailing discourse among interlocutors that could be described as an *anti-scholarly* entrepreneurialism. Here, I use the word *entrepreneurialism* in two not unrelated senses.

In the first sense, entrepreneurialism refers to the spirit of entrepreneurship—the act of identifying business opportunities and setting up one's own business ventures. Reflecting the government's enthusiastic embracement of this global magic word for economic development and competitiveness (Christensen, 2012), higher education institutions in Singapore appear to place a great deal of emphasis on inculcating an entrepreneurial spirit in the students. Indeed, this was no doubt one reason why some of my PRC scholar informants, like Zhou Peng whom I quoted previously, suggested that UIS was saturated with a “business culture.”

In 2001, a Center for Technopreneurship was set up in UIS, with responsibilities for fostering entrepreneurial activities based on technological innovation and for coordinating the entrepreneurial education programs in the university. The Center offers a Minor in Entrepreneurship open to all undergraduate students and a Master's Degree in Technopreneurship and Innovation. Among the Chinese students I interviewed, five had taken the Minor, and one had even completed the Master's Degree after her undergraduate studies. Although this number is relatively modest, I realized that the influences of such entrepreneurial education on the

individuals were often strong in terms of reshaping their educational identities and desires. Even for PRC scholars who did not formally enroll in such courses, the idea of entrepreneurship seemed to seep into their discourse by osmosis. And this relates to a second and broader sense in which I use the notion of entrepreneurialism.

To be an entrepreneur is to be a “doer,” who charges into the real world “out there” to meet people, network with people and to do things that have real impacts. There is a sense in which such an entrepreneurial ethos is antithetical to the bookish scholarly subjectivity. Admittedly, scholarship and academic pursuits at a certain level are precisely about innovation and entrepreneurialism. But for undergraduate students whose academic activities still mostly consist of absorbing and understanding relatively basic knowledge, the ethos of the entrepreneur “doer”—a figure who cannot bear to sit still but must be busy like a bee doing things—is very much at odds with the focus and dedication required of an “academic” student—a figure who is imagined to spend long hours in the library or the lab.

At least, this was how quite a few of my PRC scholar informants seemed to understand the relationship between the scholarly attitude and the entrepreneurial attitude: as antithetical, as either-or. “To study is not the main purpose of going to university, it’s all about the social experiences and networking;” “Don’t take grades that seriously, just deal with it (*yingfu yixia*); it’s really about meeting different kinds of people and broadening your horizon;” “Doing ECAs teaches you how to handle people and interpersonal communication, that’s really the point of university education; nobody will care about whether you got a first class degree or a second lower two years after your graduation.” In my interviews, I encountered many such statements and became even a bit frustrated at the ways in which they apparently contradicted those discourses of scholarly idealism that came from my informants—sometimes from the same persons!

These views on the purpose of the undergraduate education which decenter and devalue academic learning are *entrepreneurial* in the sense that they prioritize the self-conscious accumulation of social and cultural capital in terms of “interpersonal communication skills” (*renji jiaowang nengli*), “social networks” (*renmai*), “experiences” (*jingli*), “horizons” (*yanjie*), with the assumption that these assets would one day somehow magically fall into place to pave a path to success in career and life. “Exposure” was another buzzword frequently invoked by my informants (they used the English term directly within the context of a Mandarin conversation): get exposed to “real life” outside the textbooks, libraries

and labs; get exposed to cosmopolitan values and other people's cultures and lifestyles through going on exchange programs, "Global Immersion Programs," foreign internships; talk to people, play hard, go to night clubs and parties...indeed, do anything but spend your invaluable "youth" (*qin-gchun*) on reading textbooks and studying things that are likely to be quite irrelevant in one's future career anyway.

For some informants, disillusionment with UIS education served as the transitioning link between their scholarly idealism and such entrepreneurial outlooks. They took "hints" from the fact or the impression that, as Gao Mei said, most people aren't very serious about academic study in UIS, and realized with a sense of disenchantment that perhaps going to university was never about studying in the first place. Such disenchantment and revelation get further reinforced when scholars see the university value non-academic achievements as strongly as they emphasize academics. Perhaps from the perspective of the university policymakers, scholarly excellence and entrepreneurialism were never meant to be mutually exclusive but intended to serve as complementary facets to a well-rounded undergraduate student subjectivity. To the PRC scholars, however, because of the extent to which bookish study was singularly valorized by them (see Chapter 2), there could not but appear to be a tension or contradiction between the two. Perhaps this was why those scholars who had been most strongly influenced by the entrepreneurial understanding of university education tended to develop almost militantly anti-scholarly discourses and attitudes. Below, I provide quick sketches of two such scholars to illustrate this point.

SM1 Scholar: Zhang Ran

Zhang Ran was an SM1 scholar from Shaanxi Province. He came to Singapore in 2003. After having completed Secondary and then junior college education, he enrolled at UIS in the Maritime Studies major in 2008. I met Zhang Ran—then in his fourth and final year—for the first time soon after I started the Singapore-stage fieldwork in August 2011, but I did not manage to get hold of him for an interview until quite a few months later because he was tied down with an internship. When we finally had our interview at a campus café after the Chinese New Year early 2012, I began by asking him about his internship. To my surprise, he told me that this was the *fifth* internship job he had held since he became an undergraduate student. Knowing that undergraduate students typically have just one or two internships during their undergraduate course, I half-jokingly asked Zhang Ran how he even managed to find time to study.

He said, totally nonchalant, “Study...just give it the slightest attention that’ll be fine (*yisi yixia jiuxingle*). Just follow along until you get that piece of paper (*hun zhang zhi bei*)”—meaning the degree certificate.

It turned out that academic studies had never been more than a sideline concern for Zhang Ran since he became a university student. In fact, the four internships that he already had under his belt so far were all done during the relatively short span of one year since he returned from an exchange semester in Norway the year before. He not only spent all the vacation time interning at maritime/shipping related companies, even during term time, he would skip more than half of all the class hours to make sure there were three completely free weekdays on his weekly timetable so that he could work. “The exams are easy to deal with. Some classmates spend a lot more time on studying, and I spent very little time on it, but the final exam results are really not all that different. What’s the point? It’s all about accumulating real world experience and doing things,” he remarked. He further intimated that even during the first two foundational years of his degree course, which involved more intensive academic workloads, he was working more than 20 hours a week tutoring Singaporean secondary school students. “It made good money,” he said, smilingly, “at that time I was earning more than 2000 (Singapore dollars) a month just from giving tuition. Actually, during Year One and Year Two, the time I spent on teaching (tuition) was more than the time I spent on being taught (at UIS).”

What did Zhang Ran take to be the purpose of undergraduate education? “It’s about getting experience and accumulating social networks (*jizan renmai*). Do a bit of this, do a bit of that, have fun with classmates (*gen tongxue wan’r yixia*). Don’t care too much about exams. Instead, spend time on bettering interpersonal relationships (*ba renji guanxi gao-hao*). [...] Undergraduate education is pretty general, so general that it’s equal to having learnt nothing. I never expected to learn much [academically] anyway. When I got into high school, I forgot all that I learnt during secondary school; when I got into university, I forgot all that I’d learnt at high school; after you graduate, you forget all that you’ve learnt in university... It’s just a process, the point is the experience (*jingli*).”

SM2 Scholar: Peng Shuai

Peng Shuai was an SM2 scholar who came to Singapore in 2002 at the age of 17. Based on his exceptional strengths in mathematics and physics, he was accepted into the “Accelerated Programme (AP)” which would allow

him to shorten the 18-month “bridging course” to six months. However, he declined to join the AP, wishing to take his time to improve his comparatively weak command of English. He had the reputation for being a computer geek among his cohort of scholars, and unsurprisingly chose to major in Computer Engineering when he matriculated at UIS in 2004.

According to Peng Shuai, the first two undergrad years were relatively uneventful and “standard” in the sense that he did what most students did. But in his third and fourth years, things changed. In Year Three, he spent the first semester in the UK on exchange, and the second semester completing the compulsory six-month Industrial Attachment (IA) at a local telecomm company. In the summer vacation that followed, he spent two months on a “Work and Travel” program in the USA, working at the Yellowstone Park before he visited several major cities on both the East and West Coasts. In Year Four, because he had cleared most of his required credits, he took up the Minor in Entrepreneurship and started to find more intern opportunities on his own initiative. When he graduated in the summer of 2008 with a First Class Honours degree, he shocked everyone around him by not joining a big company, which was the standard path for good Honours degree holders in Singapore. Instead, he became an insurance agent. He subsequently dabbled in various business ventures such as managing a Sichuanese restaurant in Singapore’s Chinatown, representing beer brands from China in Singapore, and designing commercial websites, but has remained essentially self-employed.

When I asked Peng Shuai to reflect on his experiences studying at UIS, he replied: “The only good thing about UIS was that it was a very easy (*kuansong*) environment.” He explained:

It’s flexible. It’s easy. You don’t really have to attend the lectures or tutorials. No need. Just study for a bit before the exam, and you’ll be fine. In my first and second year, I was a so-called “good student” (*hao xuesheng*), but even then I wasn’t going to all the lectures and tutorials. My exam results were very good during the first two years. From the third year on, I basically stopped studying: went to UK on exchange for half a year, had internship for half a year, “work-and-travel”-ed to the USA. In the final year, I only had the Final Year Project to clear and that was a piece of cake. I spent most of my time working with my boss [-a senior insurance consultant], and learned the *ways of the world* (*shijie yunzuo de fangshi*). I was damn surprised when I knew I got a First Class at the end! I basically stopped studying from Year Three, and I still got a First!

Peng Shuai's narrative very much echoed Zhang Ran's. Both felt that studying wasn't worth their time. It was marginal and should be dealt with using minimal effort. In fact, Peng Shuai told me that he regretted not starting to learn "the ways of the world" even earlier in his university life, for *that* seemed to him to be the *really* important thing. During our interview, there was no mentioning at all of what he felt he achieved academically, even though he did well enough to get a First. Instead, he claimed that he started counting his real learning from the IA period in Year Three, during which time he began to learn in the workplace about how to interact with people, how to understand people, how to be successful in the battlefield of career-building (*zhichang*). Furthermore, he started foraging in the public library among popular books with titles along the lines of "how to be a successful entrepreneur" and "the seven secrets to success," which further convinced him of the idea that academic study in the university was far less relevant than people skills and the "true ways of the world."

Peng Shuai's anti-scholarly entrepreneurialism came across strongly when he made the following remarks about the university professors that he had encountered at UIS:

The professors have all got wrong worldviews (*shijieguan bu zhengque*). Many of them haven't even experienced much of the real world before they came to teach us. Their experience of the society (*shehui jingli*) is too limited, and therefore their worldviews are eschewed. For example, the professors think, in this world, as long as you have studied well, you will do well. Study hard, get a good degree, then you will be needed in the world, and will be put in positions of responsibility and importance. *But the world never happens that way! Not at all!* (*sic*, in English) Their worldviews are far too outdated; it's completely a different story now.

Peng Shuai's entrepreneurialism led him to reject the normal path taken by most fresh graduates, who attend career events, submit CVs, go through a couple of interviews, and get settled in a "normal" job. He sought to expand his social networks and tried to mobilize and exploit these networks in his various entrepreneurial endeavors after graduation. At the time of my fieldwork, it still remained to be seen whether Peng Shuai's entrepreneurial convictions would pay off. Nevertheless, it was illuminating to see the transformation he underwent from being an academically strong scholar to being a street-smart entrepreneur who spoke dismissively about academic studies and his university professors.

In the cases of Zhang Ran and Peng Shuai, we see experiences, discourses, attitudes and affects that are positioned diametrically opposite to the scholarly idealism examined earlier on in this chapter. But just as PRC scholars who harbored very strong idealistic educational desires were rare, I also found Zhang Ran and Peng Shuai to be “extreme” cases when it comes to the extent to which they embraced the anti-scholarly understanding of university education. Weaker versions of these opposing views could be simultaneously found in the discourse of virtually every PRC scholar that I spoke to. In other words, these polar opposites were the two ends of a long spectrum along which most people are placed somewhere in between, feeling neither too strongly one way nor the other, yet experiencing mixed influences from both. Their discourses and narratives were thus mixed and sometimes self-contradictory. The PRC scholars brought with them their own desires and imaginations about university education; and these desires and imaginations sometimes met with mismatch and disillusionment after they became students of a Singaporean university. On the other hand, they also took hints from what they heard, observed, and experienced to develop and revise their understandings. For the majority of undergraduate students, including the PRC scholars, attending university is a four-year long rite of passage that consists mostly in dealing with incessant demands, academic or otherwise—a task that perhaps only a minority undertakes with stronger senses of purpose and agency, while the rest simply tag passively along.

* * *

As fully-funded foreign talent, few PRC scholars would deny that they were privileged to be receiving an English-medium undergraduate education at internationally recognized institutions set in the desirably cosmopolitan and vibrant context of Singapore. Having come to Singapore certainly fulfilled many a dream and desire harbored by these young Chinese students. But as I have tried to show in this chapter, there were also educational desires that were mismatched, unfulfilled, and more importantly, renegotiated and transformed.

In these last three chapters, I have traced various *transitional* problems faced by the PRC scholars in undergoing university education in Singapore to their deep-seated sociocultural and educational subjectivities in order to explain their experiences. But my purpose has not been to essentialize these young people culturally. As is hopefully clear from the accounts I

have presented, PRC scholars were specific subjects of educational desire, but also highly reflexive ones at that. Desire's encounters feed back into the further shaping of desire, effecting the education of desire. In this journey of international and cross-cultural mobility where educational desires meet equal measures of fulfillment and frustration, international students such as Chinese foreign talent scholars in Singapore undergo mixed experiences and transformations that are often highly contingent. In this book, I cannot claim to have offered more than partial accounts of such experiences and transformations.

NOTES

1. This ideal construction of the university education was perhaps epitomized in the Oxbridge pastoral approach of yesteryear that emphasized educating generalists rather than specialists. Famously, Cardinal Newman—himself an Oxford man—believed that the university's sole purpose should be the cultivation of the students' *intellect* (Newman, 1912). This intellect is not in the form of specialized knowledge, but rather, general intellectual capabilities that make the individual student a "gentleman." Similarly, the Spanish philosopher Gasset believed that the primary concern for university education should be the transmission of what he called a "general culture" (Gasset, 1944), which gives the students a sense of orientation to life and the world. Such traditions, it is believed, had strong influences on the liberal arts college education model in contemporary North America, which prioritizes the well-rounded intellectual development of the students over specialization. To this end, teaching—the intellectual nurturing of students—is prioritized over pure scientific research. Some of my informants' discourses on their expectations of university education seem to show clear influences of such philosophical ideals. It should also be of interest here to mention that, more recently, higher education in Singapore seemed to have come under some influence from this pedagogical philosophy. In 2011, the first and only liberal arts college in Singapore, Yale-NUS College, was established as a joint venture between the National University of Singapore and Yale University, and the Singapore government invested heavily into it. Even at UIS itself, which traditionally had a focus on technology and engineering, transformations have taken place to make the undergraduate education more "broad-based."
2. In this alternative idealist vision, the university is a place for the pure pursuit of knowledge. With its roots in the archetypal research university of nineteenth-century Germany (O'Boyle, 1983), the idealism in this vision resides in the belief in "learning for its own sake" and in understanding the university

as the privileged and protected domain for such a noble and dedicated pursuit. This German research university philosophy is said to have greatly influenced the development of the large research universities in the United States, which arguably instantiates the hegemonic imaginary of a great university in today's world. American pragmatist philosopher Peirce said at the end of the nineteenth century, "a university's function is the production of knowledge" and "teaching is only a necessary means to that end" (cited in Thyer-Bacon, 2005, p. 321). As historian Sorkin (1983, p. 63) writes, "The main function of the university was to congregate students in a community devoted to learning (Wissenschaft), and to vouchsafe their total freedom to interact with their peers in an environment which, saturated with learning, proffered numerous models of consummate cultivation." Thus, the devotion to learning and the passion for knowledge may be seen as the core imaginaries in this idealistic view of university education. Again, somehow, my informants' discourse reflected such a view.

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