

Mobile Students in Liquid Modernity: Negotiating the Politics of Transcultural Identities

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Youth Moves: Identities and Education in Global Perspective

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Abstract:

Youth Moves

Identities and Education in Global Perspective

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There appear to be two orthodox views of Asian cultural identity in these new times of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). One view holds that the new Asian middle classes are 'superficially Western, essentially Oriental', uniform, unchanging, communitarian, family-oriented, tradition-bound and harmonious in contrast to the individualist, conflict-ridden, and constantly evolving Western cultures (Pinches, 1999, p. 1). The other view suggests that the new Asian middle classes are 'global yuppies' (Pinches, 1999, p. 28) seduced by 'a world of consumerism dominated by the lifestyle images of the affluent West' (Pinches, 1999, p. 2). In this paper, we illustrate then challenge these two constructions of Oriental essentialism and Western universalism, 'one rooted in local traditions of social and economic order, the other in the free-flowing global commodity market' (Pinches, 1999, p. 9). Specifically, we analyze interview data collected from Asian international students and their preparatory program teachers at an Australian university. We adopt a social relational analysis to this interview data by drawing on the work of theorists of cultural globalization (Bauman, Beck, Urry), transnational identities (Brah, Nonini, Ong), and middle class educational strategies (Ball, Pinches). In analyzing the interview scripts, we are interested in firstly, how students construct their identities-in-the-making, secondly how they negotiate their positioning by the subjectivities offered in their particular educational setting, and finally, how the teachers' discursive frames appraise the students' motives. We suggest that nostalgic discourses of cultural difference (with traces of orientalism) may be produced by Australian TESOL teachers to legitimate their knowledge position in the international higher education sector. Such discourses are also shown to be strategically deployed by Asian international students as cultural markers of distinctive modernity - Asian versus Western modernity. At the same time, however, students disrupt and contest these discourses through the strategic deployment of auto-ethnographic narratives.