Book Review

International Outlook and Mediocrity
of Higher Education in Asia

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Book Review of:
PHAN, Le Ha. *Transnational Education Crossing 'Asia' and 'the West'.* Adjusted desire, transformative mediocrity and neo-colonial disguise. New York: Routledge, 2018. 260 p.

As a researcher who is interested in the internationalization of higher education, I personally find Phan Le Ha's book *Transnational Education Crossing Asia and the West* and particularly her arguments regarding the practice and implementation of internationalization of higher education very profound and thought-provoking. Her forceful arguments related to the common and shared phenomena of transnational higher education in the Global South, English (as a medium of instruction), and (self-celebrated) discourse of the rise of Asia have opened more dynamic, holistic, and comprehensive discussion to the field. The global spread of English as the global language, or as the "Asian language of education" in particular (KIRKPATRICK, 2010 *apud* PHAN, 2017, p. 19) has inspired and triggered higher education in Asian to be more global in scope and international in quality. Mirroring to the success of some internationalization policy of higher education in the Europe – also in some western countries, some universities in Asian begin to internationalize their university. The desire for international, or Transnational Higher Education (TNE) becomes massive. However, massive commercialization of higher education

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through internationalization imperative associated with English is not the game played by the West alone but is often embraced, supported, and celebrated by and from within the so-called non-West (CHOWDHURY; PHAN, 2014; PHAN, 2018).

The desire to establish the nation, integrate the citizen globally and escalate international participation are dominant reasons for higher education reform in Asian higher education. Most of them have located international and global ranking and reputation as the goals. We can now witness the significant transformation of Higher Education in many Asian countries, rapid migration of "the West" to Asia and Asia(n) to the West, and enormous collaboration and cooperation between the West and Asia, as well as among Asian themselves. These endeavors are presupposed to reach, compete, and sustain social, cultural, and political capital amid the globalized world. Internationalization of higher education is a response to the globalization and English seems to be language norm to materialize such a desire (RIZVI; LINGARD, 2010). Though many Asian universities have shown up in the top 25 world university rankings, still there are some complex and intricate tasks to establish better quality education for all and "friendlier" international university atmosphere for international actors in particular.

The book is divided into 11 chapters and an afterword by Francis L. Collins. The first three chapters introduce fundamental stances – transformative mediocrity, "Asia vs. West" as a strategic discourse, adjusted desire for the West, and ownership of English within TNE contexts. Phan Le Ha further offers rich intellectual debates on some concepts, including Asia, the rise of Asia, the West, EMI, internationalization, globalization, and colonization. The paradox about Asia and the West discourse is the focus of chapter 4 where the West is often referred to validate the quality of TNE across ASIA. At the same time, the values of the East are also valorized and commercialized among ASIAN international students in different settings: UAE, Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia, for instance. These values are promoted as the unique point, additional benefit, and added value that the West themselves may be unlikely to offer.

Chapter 5 specifically discusses the interconnectedness of English, (national/individual) identity, and internationalization. There is a contradictory attitude regarding the internationalization of HE at the national and individual levels. In the former, this policy is positively embraced, while in the latter, international students participating at those HEs are captivated by "confusion, skepticism, anger, and even feelings of being misinformed" (PHAN, 2017, p. 12). In addition, the EMI and internationalization policy has perpetuated and legitimized academic monolithicism, native speakerism, and linguistic imperialism (PENNYCOOK, 2017). Chapters 6 and 7 provide a case study in Saudi Arabia and Vietnam respectively. The themes discussed in these chapters cover the appropriation and abuse of English and internationalization in Saudi Arabia with its college of excellence project and quality, inequality,

and employability associated with "the West ". Intercultural Interaction in EMI program" is the focus of chapter 8. The author demonstrates that the intercultural interaction in TNE under the EMI program tends to be illusive. Students remain desire for Native Speakers of English as the imagined authentic and legitimate interlocutors in such a setting. The very idea of local, international, and foreign – that are viewed in binary lens, is a serious issue and perhaps important factor to the construction of racial discrimination and abuse of internationalization.

"Transnational Education and Dream Realisation" (chapter 10) elicits the journey of international students from a rather disadvantaged background in Thailand, Vietnam, and Dubai. In particular, Phan Le Ha discusses how they appropriate English for their benefits and transformations. Regardless of enormous critiques of TNE and its mediocrity, "students' appreciation of English and active engagement" with their respective TNE "are powerful and deserve attention" (p. 212). In chapter 12, Phan Le Ha further theorizes what she has discussed throughout the book about adjusted desire, transformative mediocrity, and neo-colonial disguise. In what follows, I further discuss her very notions in the following sub-sections.

This book may be of interest of and helpful resource for researchers, policymakers, educators, and students who work on (transnational) higher education. The voices of participating stakeholders of TNE across ASIA that the author has presented in this book could offer important insights as to how to revisit or re-design the internationalization policy. The desire to build 'international' quality education, which may still need to be critically redefined, should not entrench social and linguistic injustice, increase exclusivity, or promote self-pride. On the contrary, it should open more chances for transformations at the individual, university, and national levels. More importantly, the very idea of international should not be placed against national, local, foreign, West, or East, as if they are competing against one another. Instead, they should be viewed as interconnected and interdependent (PHAN, 2017; RIZVI; LINGARD, 2010).

Transnational higher education and mediocrity

What Phan Le Ha means by transnational higher education covers "any educational programs that enroll students from a country other than the one in which the awarding institution is based" and "English-medium programs and courses offered by local institutions" (PHAN, 2017, p. 6-7). The TNE in ASEAN and Middle East countries she examined, regardless of the different degree, tend to abuse the term internationalization and English and use them as a tool to attract prospective "international" students. They deliberately associate themselves with the West while maintaining the discourse of locality and value of Asia through sustainable and intensive commercialization of "East meets the West", among others.

However, the information, advertisement, and promotion of those TNEs are often contradictory to the reality in the ground. Such transformátion and desire to internationalization and English language command, imagined as key important assets for competing in the globalized world, are not sufficiently and thoroughly prepared, let alone adequately executed. Instead, as clearly exemplified by the *College of Excellence* project in Saudi Arabia, among others, the imagined transformation towards more quality education to produce competent human resources, unfortunately, turns into the practice of an economic generating engine and resulted in "academic mediocrity and capitalism" (PHAN, 2017, p. 129).

Of all mentioned pieces of evidence and argumentations that Phan Le Ha has brought to the fore, I agree that (transnational) higher education, with its internationalization, appropriated Asia-West discourse, and English, has become a commodity played out by the some stakeholders in the upper layer. However, it is also worth highlighting that they – "international", the West, and English – are also desired by students as they see and put hope for their "better" future on them.

Mediocre yet transformative, refuted but embraced from with in the ground: English and internationalization

Although some critiques have been put against mediocre quality at many Asian TNE, there is still another upbeat spirit embraced by students like Khalid and Jimlea as thoroughly voiced out in Phan Le Ha's work. Regardless of the abuse, exploitation, and commercialization of English and internationalization within mediocre TNE, all these mediocrities, tensions, and complexities have enabled Khalid and Jimlea, at least, to materialize their dream and gain benefits of English and "the West" via the East. In other words, both English and "international/transnational" HE lead to transformative movement. The participants in Phan Le Ha's work appreciate English and engage actively, in a different degree, with TNE.

Phan Le Ha's sincere and courageous position to display and unpack both cultural politics of English and international/transnational HE across different geographical regions, settings, and contexts deserves a high appreciation. Unlike many works that usually take one side dimension in looking at this phenomena, Phan Le Ha has offered us with the evil and bright side of the field being studied in a very comprehensive manner. It is no wonder that her work will remain essential to the years forward.

All in all, it is necessary to re-envision the TNE in Asian countries and highlight that the relationship between Asia and the West is interdependence, as has been clearly argued in Phan Le Ha's book. Besides, following De Costa (2018) recommendations for TNE to survive and thrive, the ethos for collaboration and awareness that either the West

or Asia cannot stand independently without the others needs to be more tangibly actualized and realized.

Inequalities and discrimination: When white and native speakers are desired but not wanted

Transnational higher education (TNE) in most of the Global South settings are considered to be a fertile place to generate revenue from middle to upper-class society who desire for the Western quality education but cannot afford it in the original country. They thus often opt to send their kids to the TNE operating in their home country or in neighboring Asian regions. There is an uncritical shared belief that a degree from a western university is more prestigious, valuable, and perhaps marketable for a future employment. Phan Le Ha explicates, however, that in the case of Vietnamese students enrolling to TNE, employability is it is not their main concern in choosing TNE. Another common assumption is that they often cater to elites family only and thus perpetuate inequality and access to education.

The so-called quality education, moreover is often absent in that TNE happens to be international in the outlook per se but mediocre in practice, ranging from low-level input of students' and teachers' English command, to illegitimate teachers' qualification backgrounds. This book contributes to this understanding and negative evaluation of many TNE in the Asian context in particular. However, the book also documents surprising evidences. Many of international students in the universities that Phan Le Ha interviewed came from the less advantaged family background. The allegedly mediocre TNE in Vietnam for example has enabled Jimlea to materialize her dreams. It even empowers, improves, and helps her to grow persistently. Through an opportunity to study in one of the Australian branch campuses in Dubai, a farmer boy from Afghanistan, Khalid, also has been able to dream higher and transform into a more powerful man in terms of idea or agenda. In different words, the TNE to one extent has also played a significant contribution to the help these "little people" to access "international" quality education. More importantly, it gives them transformative power regardless of mediocre quality associated to these TNE.

This book also presents a more balanced discussion and argumentation regarding the very notion of native speakerism, the white, and prevalent dichotomy of West vs East, or global, international vs local. Some literature has documented how the white native-English speakers have enjoyed privileged over the growth of TNE and English as a medium of instruction (PENNYCOOK, 2017; PHILLIPSON, 2014). Nonetheless, there is also often a paradox in that white native-English speakers are used as a commercialization tool to legitimize the term international (KIM, 2016; PHAN, 2015). The White, the West, and English native speaker participants in the context of Thailand that Phan Le Ha

interviewed underwent even more dilemmas and tensions. Local Thai colleagues often ignore their academic credentials. These informants, in fact, have a credible academic background, graduated from a reputable university, and are dedicated and committed to their teaching. However, they are often still considered foreigners in their very context and accused and equated to incompetent backpackers who teach English for money. Their presence is desired, but their voice seems to be not wanted.

The game of English within the commercialization of international higher education is not necessarily played by the west alone. The players and consumers of TNE in the Asian context have been aware of mediocre quality embedded in there. Throughout the book, Phan Le Ha demonstrates how and why such a mediocrity is endorsed, legitimized, and desirable. The potential capital accumulation of English and stereotype against English language speakers are advocated, circulated, and embraced by, within, and among actors involved in TNE who are themselves non-native speakers of English. They desire for particular social imaginary of English, English speakers, and international higher education in the West. For that reason, it is often the case that black native-English speakers do not feel that their English is recognized or appreciated. Their presence does not seem enough to promote the very idea of international or English speakers. However, the physical presence of the West, the white, and native English speakers (from the Inner Circle) are not inevitably welcomed because the local actors in the TNE often view them as a supplementary element necessary for promotions. Their presence may "cause different kinds of tension and rejection to certain ways of doing, learning, and teaching" (PHAN, 2017, p. 220).

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Perspectivas Internacionais e Mediocridade do Ensino Superior na Ásia

Resenha de:

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