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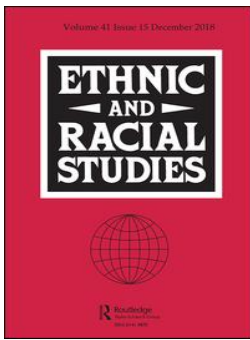
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## Aspiration and anxiety: Asian migrants and Australian schooling

by Christina Ho, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 2020, 206 pp., \$34.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780522874839

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Aspiration and anxiety: Asian migrants and Australian schooling**, by Christina Ho, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 2020, 206 pp., \$34.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780522874839

*Aspiration and Anxiety* addresses what may seem like a specialized topic – Asian migrants in the Australian school system – but its analyses illuminate underlying logics shaping societies and subjectivities far more widely in the world today. The book's central argument is that high-achieving Asian students have become scapegoats for widespread dissatisfaction with the effects of Australia's neoliberal education policies, which have exacerbated social inequality and entrenched an educational culture based on competition and elitism. Ho develops this argument through sensitive and insightful analysis of in-depth interviews with students and their parents in selective government schools in Sydney, where Asian-Australian students dominate enrolments. While mainstream commentators routinely blame "Asians" for introducing a culture of intensive commercial tutoring that sees migrant students dominate selective schools that were originally intended to benefit "naturally gifted" children, Ho points out that migrants cannot reasonably be blamed for their capacity to prosper within an educational system produced by Australian government policies. She shows that Asian migrant families' educational endeavours are driven by the two parallel motivations of aspiration and anxiety. The neoliberal-style aspiration toward self-advancement is intensified in this migrant population thanks to the values embedded in Australian immigration settings, which hyper-select for highly educated middle-class applicants; while migrants' deep-seated anxiety is born of their first-hand knowledge of racial discrimination and their lack of social capital in Australian society. Thus, the book powerfully demonstrates, Australia's neoliberal immigration and education policies combine to produce a regrettable situation in which the public school system becomes ever more competitive and stratified, and those who can pay for private tuition prosper at the expense of less well-resourced students. Asian migrants and their educational strategies are just one element within this larger system.

The book advances these arguments through seven chapters in addition to its Introduction and Conclusion. Chapter 1 examines the contextual background of Asian-Australian students' strong academic performance, particularly with reference to the advantaged class status of educationally successful Asian background students. It makes the crucial point that educational achievement correlates far more strongly with social class than with any "cultural" factors.

The second chapter turns to the neoliberal policy contexts that select for middle-class migrants and frame education as a market based on principles of choice and competition. It provides powerful analyses of the elitism inherent in the selective schools system and the ways in which this system perpetuates and exacerbates both social inequality and ethnic segregation.

Chapter 3 focuses on how education fits into Asian migrants' aspirational mindset. It offers a forceful critique of the "neoliberal politics of migrant aspiration" (68), which sees "Asian migrants [...] unintentionally advance[ing] governments' agenda to neoliberalise education" (69), while making the important point that related parenting and educational behaviours are also on the rise among non-Asian middle-class families. "The racialisation of this debate", Ho persuasively contends, "effectively closes down opportunities for frank discussion" (70).

The next chapter examines Asian migrants' anxiety as a motivator for their educational strategies. Beginning with an overview of fiercely competitive education cultures in some migrants' countries of origin, it then considers migrants' anxieties in Australia, including about the comparative freedoms of the Australian school system, racism in the job market, and their children's need for a "safe" career to ensure a secure future.

Chapter 5 provides a detailed study of the selective school system including its historical genesis and students' experiences of its competitive and arguably credentialist culture. It includes a compelling section on the uptake of commercial, exam-oriented tutoring in selective schools, which, horrifyingly, is prevalent to the degree that both educationally and symbolically, tutoring often becomes "more important than school" (114).

Chapter 6 zooms in on fraught intercultural relations within Sydney's selective schools from the perspectives of both Asian-Australian and Anglo-Australian students and parents. While on one hand numerical domination by Asian background students affords them a safe space within the wider Anglo-dominant culture, it also produces a "bubble" effect that some worry may ultimately disadvantage graduates. And while the experience of being an ethnic minority is a valuable one for Anglo students, it can also lead to a sense of social isolation and exacerbate resentment and racism toward Asian-Australian peers. This chapter's disturbing conclusion is that selective school culture is characterized by "the omnipresence of race and, arguably, the over-racialisation of identity" (146).

Chapter 7 provides further detail on Anglo students in the selective school system, especially the resentment they often voice at the dominance of Asian-Australian students and the racialized divisions this fuels. One of the sharpest observations in this chapter and the book as a whole concerns the self-perceptions of Anglo-Australian parents and students. Anglo parents like to see themselves as "relaxed" proponents of "balanced", "holistic" education – and yet, "while these parents may express distaste for the instrumentalist and competitive approach taken by 'Asian tiger parents,' their own educational strategies embody a similar effort to reproduce class-based privilege" (163), especially in sending children to elite private schools that command the financial and social resources to offer the range of activities thought to produce "well-rounded" graduates. Thus, the Anglo pursuit of "balance" and the Asian pursuit of academic achievement emerge as different tactics used by two groups that share the common goal of maximizing their own self-advancement.


The brief Conclusion is where the full weight of the work is brought to bear as Ho advances several provocative proposals based on her findings. These include

that Australian society would be better served by an immigration program based on humanitarian not neoliberal values; that existing immigration policy has produced “an economically unbalanced migrant community whose legitimate pursuit of self-interest threatens to undermine social cohesion” (171); and that Australian society would benefit from reforms to its education system based on egalitarianism rather than competition.

As Ho argues, “lack of understanding is a barrier to productive dialogue about the role of Asian migrants in Australia’s evolving education system”, and “understanding the deeper context for [their] behaviour is vital for a more informed debate” (170). *Aspiration and Anxiety* is both a ground-breaking contribution to such understanding, and an impassioned plea for an alternative vision. It should be required reading for anyone working in education or educational policymaking today.

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