

A Critical Ethnography of ‘Westerners’ Teaching English in China: Shanghaied in Shanghai, by Phiona Stanley, London, Routledge, 2013, 288 pp., £95.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-415-65622-1

Westerners are increasingly welcomed in Chinese universities, especially as English language teachers. Questions inevitably arise concerning the suitability of such teachers, their preparedness, and the impact of such experience upon their own sense of self. This book attempts to provide answers to some of these questions through an in-depth ethnographic case study focusing upon nine ‘westerners’ teaching ‘oral’ English in a second-tier university in Shanghai. The author aims to unveil and describe the lived experience and beliefs of these nine teachers, to interpret what the experience means to them, and to problematize the power relations between western teachers and Chinese stakeholders in this university. The author has herself been a teacher in China and five other countries and a teacher trainer for Cambridge CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) in Australia. The verb form in the title ‘Shanghaied’ refers to the western teachers’ experience of teaching without full prior knowledge of their working context, rather than suggesting that they were coerced into taking the job, or unwillingly detained in employment.

Stanley’s research was undertaken during visits between 2007 and 2011 as a participant teacher-researcher. She assembled detailed field notes while conducting interview-observation-interview investigations, following a grounded-theory and data-driven analytical approach. The author first argues that these teachers are not professionally well-prepared for this job in this university context, in spite of the fact that they have basic qualifications, such as an undergraduate degree or CELTA, to teach English language. The cause of this, the author claims, is a mismatch between the ‘western-style’ ELT (English Language Teaching) training skills and the contextual challenges they encountered in China. While the CELTA emphasizes teachers’ language awareness and the practical skills of promoting English language practice in a communicative framework, the primary role of these western teachers in this university was to build an image of ‘foreignness’ in their classrooms which fits Chinese stereotypes of the occidentals (208). She attempts to show how the teachers face the pressure of making their lessons fun for the students, often using teaching methods involving game-playing. Stanley claims that part of the problem lay with the perceived lack of pedagogical support. In this process, teachers have to acculturate themselves to this entirely different teacher-centred, fun-oriented, and free-style class context by acquiring new, practical skills. However, this also results in the teachers’ gradual loss of the skills they previously learned from CELTA. Furthermore, owing to the absence of effective orientation and a specific job description, these teachers lack a clear conceptualization of the ‘oral English’ they teach, and they give a variety of different understandings as to what oral English is. Professional practitioners may question such claims.

The author problematizes the power relations that develop between the Chinese stakeholders in the university and the western teachers, focusing in particular upon how this impacts upon the professional and cultural identities of the teachers. She argues that in the process of acculturation, western teachers experience frustrations because of the unexpected work environment and new living conditions. This, it is argued, further demotivates the teachers, and negatively affects their image and identity. Stanley argues that this teaching experience may have established or reinforced the negative concept of otherness perceived between western teachers and Chinese students, rather than improving the teachers’ intercultural communication competence. Again, such views may attract critical attention from some of the readers of the book.

This book will serve as an interesting and thought-provoking resource for researchers, professionals, and practitioners. It contributes up-to-date empirical data on western teachers

in China from the perspective of an 'insider' of a limited and particular setting. Using a method of reflexivity, the author presents extensive citations of the participants' statements, enabling readers to confront authentic expressions of views. Elsewhere in the book, Stanley provides a comprehensive summary of the theoretical background and existing literature on Chinese thinking about English language, English teaching policies and practices in China, and transnational experience and identities, which makes it a valuable reference for those engaged academically and professionally in the field.

Nevertheless, I would find the discussion more interesting if these teachers' discourses towards oral English had been examined not only from the 'how they understand it' point of view but also from a World Englishes perspective, i.e. whether they think Chinese people should learn a Standard English model or a China English model, or whether they correct the oral English with Chinese characteristics during formal teaching sessions (Jenkins, 2009). While the participants in the research for this book do represent a sub-group of western teachers, care needs to be taken not to see this sample as necessarily representative, as distinct differences will exist from university to university and from city to city. The experience within a second-tier university in Shanghai should be read for its distinctiveness rather than its applicability across the wider HE field. Tan and Hu (2010) have shown how preferential treatment for western academic staff means that experiences in some universities can be highly positive and desirable. Such has been the rapidity of change within China in terms of how visitors from other countries are perceived that readers need to exercise a degree of caution concerning the level of generalization on this issue within this book. One crucial limitation, which the author herself acknowledges, is her lack of focus upon student perspectives, as their expectations and experiences of 'western' teachers form an important aspect of this subject that is unrepresented in this study.

Most particularly, this book provides an insight into the lived experiences of a small group of 'westerners' teaching in a second-tier university in Shanghai, a group who have increasing significance because of their role in consolidating the international reach of such universities.

References

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