# Book review: *From 'Teach for America' to 'Teach for China': Global teacher education reform and equity in education*, by Sara Lam

Yue Melody Yin (iD)

## Peer review

This article has been through editorial review.

## Open access

The *London Review of Education* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.
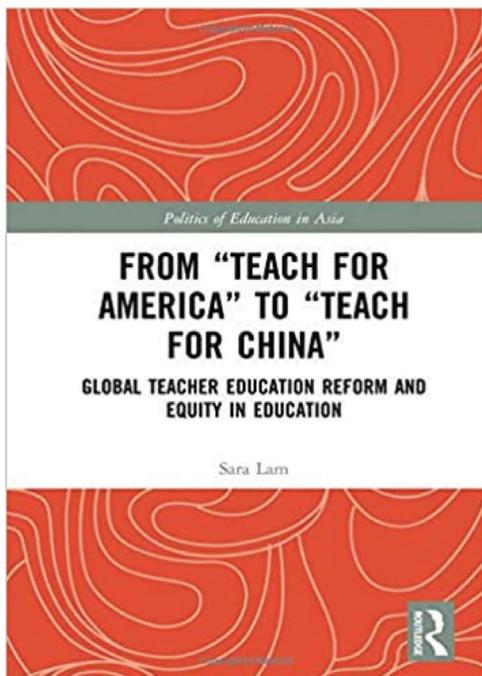
# LONDON REVIEW OF EDUCATION

# Book Review

Yue Melody Yin* – *Jiangnan University, China*

## From 'Teach for America' to 'Teach for China': Global teacher education reform and equity in education, by Sara Lam

The neo-liberal educational reform movements consistently question the effectiveness of traditional teacher preparation programmes. In recent decades, the emergence of alternative pathways into teaching has changed the landscape of teacher education in the US. This has occurred largely through compression of the content of pre-service training and abbreviation of professional preparation, justified through a rhetoric of recruiting the 'right' people, namely elite university graduates. One of the most prominent examples of this development is Teach for America. Based on the Teach for America (TFA) model, Teach for All is an international umbrella organization working alongside a growing network of 56 affiliate programmes, ranging from Teach for Afghanistan to Teach First in England and Wales (Olmedo *et al.*, 2013; Yin *et al.*, 2019).

This book was written based on Dr Sara Lam's doctoral thesis after she graduated from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She was not only a researcher, but a practitioner in supporting teachers working in rural areas of China as a co-founder of the Rural China Education Foundation. With rich insights and practice in this area, her book on the role of Teach for China (TFC) in addressing educational

*Email: yinyue@jiangnan.edu.cn

equity has gone some way to filling two gaps in this research arena. First, since partner programmes originated in Western developed countries, most existing research is focusing on programmes in the US, where the 'Teach for' approach was founded, and in Western countries that adopted the approach. Studies of how such programmes work in developing countries, such as China, have been few (Crowley, 2016). Second, scholars have tended to adopt quantitative approaches to investigate the effectiveness of teachers recruited through alternative routes into the profession, especially in comparison with their traditionally prepared counterparts. There has been less research that has qualitatively explored teachers' unique experience in these programmes (Lefebvre and Thomas, 2019). Therefore, the unique in-depth observational and ethnographic research undertaken by Lam has yielded important and insightful findings.

Lam has closely followed the lives of TFC fellows from their pre-service training to their work as teachers in partner schools for four months. She interviewed a wide range of people, including 21 TFC fellows, a Teach for All leader, several TFC leaders, staff, alumni, local education officials, school administrators and teachers. Based on collected data and relevant literatures, she initially interrogates how TFA and Teach for All developed against the backdrop of neo-liberalism, before examining how TFC, an educational model that flourished in a neo-liberal state, evolves when transferred into a country with strong state control.

Two thought-provoking questions were asked and discussed in this book, both of which deserve wider attention. The first relates to how an educational model might travel to a context so different from that in which it originated. The comparison between TFA and TFC is a major theme running throughout the text. Despite such different social contexts, the two programmes share basic values and modes. Elite graduates with intensive pre-service training are delivered to disadvantaged schools for two years; in the long run, these young people are expected to lead education reforms in wider contexts. To align with this model, the recruitment explicitly excluded locals, regardless of how effective they are in teaching and how much potential they have for exerting a transformative impact on local education.

This book uncovered ways in which TFC diverged from TFA. For instance, Lam found that TFA devotes energy to reinforcing the pursuit of high standardized test scores, while TFC promotes the development of student-centred education. Moreover, TFC has some creative initiatives. For instance, TFC established two primary schools for implementing its educational ideals and a research centre for providing corresponding professional development. In addition, TFC fellows are encouraged to initiate an 'autonomous project' which demonstrates impact beyond classroom teaching within the two years' service. Lam reports that 90 per cent of the TFC fellows have been involved in such projects, often with their students (146). In contrast, TFA corps members seldom interacted with their students after class. Compared with TFA corps members, however, the salary of TFC fellows is much lower, and the fellows are not eligible for any official teacher licensure at the completion of the programme. In this way, TFC fellows had to bear more financial pressure but fewer potential benefits, which might influence perceptions and experience of programme participation.

The second of the questions canvassed by Lam relates to whether outsiders such as elite university graduates can be effective in solving educational inequality in economic and/or culturally marginalized areas. She tried very hard to find the answer. In the short term, the evidence suggests that TFC failed to respond to the teacher shortage in the programme areas; indeed, the fellows replaced veteran qualified local teachers. Moreover, student-centred ideas and methods were difficult for

inexperienced and underprepared novice teachers to apply in rural classrooms. Lam concludes that, in the long run, compared with ambitious and capable local members of the teaching profession, TFC fellows might not be fit candidates for educational leadership or changemakers for rural areas.

This book captured many useful insights, but Lam also astutely points out the limitations of her study. She highlighted the relatively small-scale snapshot her research produced, noting that it would be valuable to take a longitudinal approach and include local students, parents and community members (7). As is said in an eternal classic of Chinese philosophy, *Tao Te Ching*, 'who understands the world is learned; who understands the self is enlightened'. I appreciate her self-criticism, but I have two further suggestions.

Concepts and theories, including 'policy entrepreneurship' and 'global advocacy network' in Part One and 'deliberative democratic theory' in Part Three, provide powerful explanatory purchase. In terms of Part Two, it presents rich data pertaining to whether or not fellows could solve local education inequality with respect to both the 'quantity' of education available in rural areas and the 'quality' of such. Here, however, the analysis suffers somewhat from a lack of appropriate theoretical support. I highly recommend the key thinking tools 'capital', 'habitus' and 'field' of Pierre Bourdieu, which provide a comprehensive sociological gaze to account for individuals' social practices. While the text did mention 'cultural capital' (74) at one point, Lam did not probe the data deeply with this concept.

Lam stated her researcher positionality by reflecting on her elite background and relevant experience as a co-founder of a non-government organization for supporting rural teachers (176). While useful, the reflexive work left me curious about how her positionality played out in the research decisions. Given her background, one could imagine that 'proximity and familiarity' (Bourdieu, 1999: 610) might have narrowed the social distance between Lam and the TFC fellows. This was certainly my own experience in a study undertaken in a similar context (Yin, 2018). In this situation, the issue of how to keep 'epistemological vigilance' is significant (Bourdieu, 1988: 780; Bourdieu *et al.*, 1991: 69). Bourdieu drew on the concept of participant objectivation to 'make the mundane exotic and the exotic mundane, in order to render explicit what in both cases is taken for granted' (Bourdieu and Wacquant: 68). He believed that 'participant objectivation' was a key to discover the deep truth of the society when a researcher can further objectivize his/her hidden interests that have been invested (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

Overall, this book offers informative and well-written insights into the world of the TFC experience in China, which will not disappoint readers who want to learn more about the 'Teach for' model, especially its global mobility. This book also leads us to carefully think about what is behind the emerging alternative routes into teaching. Educational inequality is a long-standing problem, and it remains prevalent throughout the world, including in the richest countries. Whether intentional or not, Teach for All member organizations take the hero teacher narratives to indicate that the solutions to educational inequities lie in idealistic and capable individuals. It is true there are individual teachers who have real lifelong impact on their students, but this discourse puts tremendous pressure on individual participants and has even caused mental and health problems (Brewer, 2014; Matsui, 2015; Thomas and Lefebvre, 2018). Therefore, we should be very careful in our support of this discourse, since educational problems are largely connected to structural, historical and cultural system constraints, which are difficult, if not impossible, to surmount by substituting 'capable' individuals for existing teachers.

## Acknowledgements

## Notes on the contributor

**Yue Melody Yin** works in Jiangnan University, China, specializing in the sociology of education. Her research topic is alternative teacher recruitment programmes which channel prestigious university graduates to the teaching profession in disadvantaged schools.

## References

Bourdieu, P. (1988) 'Vive la crise! For heterodoxy in social science'. *Theory and Society*, 17 (5), 773–87. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00162619.

Bourdieu, P. (1999) *The Weight of the World.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P., Chamboredon, J.-C. and Passeron, J.-C. (1991) *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological preliminaries.* Trans. R. Nice. New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Brewer, T.J. (2014) 'Accelerated burnout: How Teach for America's academic impact model and theoretical culture of accountability can foster disillusionment among its corps members'. *Educational Studies*, 50 (3), 246–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2014.907163.

Crowley, C. (2016) 'Teach for/future China and the politics of alternative teacher certification programs in China'. In L. Lim and M.W. Apple (eds), *The Strong State and Curriculum Reform: Assessing the politics and possibilities of educational change in Asia.* New York: Routledge, 131–47.

Lefebvre, E.E. and Thomas, M.A.M. (2019) 'Alternative routes to teaching'. In M. Peters (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Teacher Education.* Singapore: Springer, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-1179-6_49-1.

Matsui, S. (2015) *Learning from Counternarratives in Teach For America: Moving from idealism towards hope.* New York: Peter Lang AG.

Olmedo, A., Bailey, P.L. and Ball, S.J. (2013) 'To infinity and beyond…: Heterarchical governance, the Teach for All network in Europe and the making of profits and minds'. *European Educational Research Journal*, 12 (4), 492–512. https://doi.org/10.2304/eerj.2013.12.4.492.

Thomas, M.A. and Lefebvre, E.E. (2018) 'The dangers of relentless pursuit: Teaching, personal health, and the symbolic/real violence of Teach for America'. *Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education*, 39 (6), 856–67. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2017.1311298.

Yin, Y. (2018) 'From Prestigious University to Teachers in Disadvantaged Schools: A sociological study of participation in an alternative teacher recruitment program'. PhD thesis, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane.

Yin, Y.M., Dooley, K. and Mu, G.M. (2019) 'Why do graduates from prestigious universities choose to teach in disadvantaged schools? Lessons from an alternative teacher preparation program in China'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 77, 378–87. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.10.011.