

# Emotional Geographies of International Education and Public Diplomacy

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In 2018, before the viral qualities of globalisation became apparent, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimated that some 5.6 million students worldwide were involved in cross border education (OECD 2020). From export income to international goodwill and cooperation, the benefits of international education seemed indisputable. By 2020, a remarkably different picture had emerged as international border closures reduced the worldwide circulation of international students to a fraction of their pre-pandemic numbers. Considered a 'leader' in exporting education, Australia has witnessed significant financial losses that are now undermining the viability of its universities (Rizvi 2020). Australian universities have also been drawn into a foreign policy maelstrom, criticised for failing to uphold academic freedom in the face of their dependency on international student fees (HRW 2021). Not for the first time have educational exchanges and their contributions to cultural and public diplomacy been questioned (Bu 1999; Lehman 2020; Mulvey 2019). Where soft power narratives once claimed space, the rhetoric now gestures to 'hard power'. Emotions are running high.

Motion and emotion share a relationship in etymology. The Latin for motion, *movere*, captures external movements of bodies and objects. Emotion – *emovere* – describes the internal movements of the heart, 'to agitate'; 'to stir' (Wiktionary 2021). When people cross borders to live or study in another country, they encounter events, cultural Others, ideas, and different ways of knowing. These encounters of sameness and difference are emotionally ambivalent; they are suggestive of unintended possibilities. The pedagogical desires of governments, in short, are as likely to be erased, as they are to be consolidated in university classrooms and neighbourhoods (Bu 1999; Laifer & Kitchen 2017). The desire to know, and the passion to ignore, are matters of emotion.

In this article, I argue for a focus on emotions to understand the relations between international education and public diplomacy. Emotions and emotional discourses are an avenue to understand the material and social worlds encountered by international students during their study sojourns. Public diplomacy, a desired objective of governments and institutions, is furthered when everyday encounters allow for emotions to be processed into 'cosmopolitan sociabilities' – social relations of mutuality and respect (Glick-Schiller & Cagler 2016; Ang et al 2015). To explore the place of emotions in both creating and limiting possibilities for cosmopolitan sociabilities, I draw on empirical insights from Australia and from a (pre-pandemic) study into the emotional geographies of international student mobilities in East Asia (Sidhu, Ho & Yeoh 2020).

## Emotions as social and historical processes

An influential contribution to understanding the possibilities and tensions underpinning 'a world on the move' is Sara Ahmed's framework of 'affective economies' (Ahmed 2014). Inspired by psychoanalytic insights and Marx's theory of commodity value, Ahmed challenges the common-sense assumption that emotions are private, interiorised, psychological dispositions. She enquires into the *political work* done by emotions to mediate the relationships between self and other, individual and collective, private and public, psychic and social, personal and geopolitical. As a relational force, emotions drive the circulations of ideas and imaginaries, simultaneously connecting and disconnecting people and places. In their (pre)emergent forms, emotions shape actions and experiences even before they are named and rationalised. Their 'sticky' qualities allow emotions to adhere selectively to subjects and objects, drawing some together, and others apart (Svašek & Skrbíš 2007).



### International education encounters and cosmopolitan sociabilities

Perceptions of hospitality and hostility are uppermost in the minds of students and their families in choosing study destinations. In our study of international students in East Asian universities<sup>1</sup>, the ready availability of scholarships – seen as a gesture of hospitality – influenced students to choose an Asian study destination. For students and their families, the prospects of experiential hardships and hostility in ‘a white majority society’ were driving forces in moving away from the ‘west’. Discrimination, social isolation, and being called into being as a lesser subject because of language difficulties, generated disquiet and anxiety (Sidhu, Ho & Yeoh 2020; Benesch 2017). The rising reputations of Asian universities made visible through ‘world-class’ league tables, meant that students could aspire to have an education of ‘global’ standing while remaining regionally anchored.

Our study was conducted at a time when hostile emotions were circulating between China and Japan over sovereignty disputes regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, between Japan and Korea over reparations for ‘comfort women’, and China and Taiwan in relation to the One-China policy. The study’s respondents though, were largely appreciative of their opportunities to have access to polyphonic conversations about these unresolved geopolitical tensions from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Living overseas, they observed, gave them the opportunity to question the hold of hegemonic nationalist discourses. In their words, they could ‘view the same event from different perspectives’; ‘... think about things’: ‘have a broader perspective’. Homogeneity of thought was regarded as highly undesirable. Having surrendered the emotional capital that comes

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with being ‘loyal’ citizens, the international student participants nonetheless acknowledged their love and pride of country while maintaining a desire to differentiate themselves from officialdom. Pleading the excuse of heavy study loads, they maintained a wary distance from their ‘ultranationalist’ peers. The diversity of their social positionings meant that students expressed varying degrees of candour about ‘social problems’ in their home countries. Those with access to political capital seemed to experience less discomfort with the order of things compared to their peers (Sidhu, Ho & Yeoh 2020, Chapter 6).

Their everyday interactions on and off campus exposed students to different groups of people – other international students, co-nationals, co-ethnics, and host country students and citizens. For the greater part, these were convivial and respectful encounters with some limits: inter-cultural mixing with host country students was reported to be less frequent compared to relations with other international student communities. Hyper-competitive East Asian academic cultures and language barriers reduced the spaces for sociable encounters (Sidhu, Ho & Yeoh 2020; Collins et al 2014; Fincher & Shaw 2009; O’Connor 2020).

### Emotional matters: The limits of cosmopolitan sociabilities

Education’s centrality in reproducing national, social, and cultural orders makes it an emotional matter. In schools children learn to embody the emotional rules and roles that maintain who belongs in ‘the nation’ and ‘community’. In the teaching and learning spaces of universities, emotional discourses elicit different levels of regard towards international students. Students from ‘friendly’ countries receive comparatively warmer responses, in contrast to those from ‘rouge’ nations. Those from dangerous places might be seen as embodiments of threat, whether as vectors of virulent diseases (Smith 2020; Tao 2020), or threats to

national security (Kakuchi & Sharma 2021). Cultural others might be also desired if seen as strategic assets to improve economic competitiveness (Saxenian 1999; Ho & Ge 2011; Liu-Farrer et al 2021).

In many national settings, emotional discourses are usefully mobilized to construct binaries between 'ideal' students who are considered 'deserving' of their university places and Others whose arrival signals a breakdown of the 'correct' order of things. As cultural outsiders, international students in Australia may initiate compassion as they struggle with stress-inducing events such as the loss of familiarity and difficulties of high-level learning in different languages. Reinforcing these narratives are academic discourses portraying international students as melancholic subjects at risk of 'culture shock' and poor mental health, burdens that impose further demands on stretched institutional resources. As outsiders, international students may also evoke generalised resentment through narratives of injury. Their presence is equated with the displacement of the normative national subject ('white working class') who is seen to be denied opportunities (Indelicato 2018). Damage and injury to academic 'standards' is also offered as a rationale against the presence of international students, perceived to have 'purchased' an education. The spectre of 'bogus students' and 'backdoor migrants' positions students as lacking integrity. They come to be seen as abusing the hospitality of the state and its citizens (Robertson 2013). Cultural chauvinism becomes 'understandable'. Grippled by feelings of resentment at an imagined injury, it is easy to ignore the purposeful manner through which the education-migration nexus is assembled to further various economic interests (Hawthorne 2010; Robertson 2013). International students have been the objects of invitation and seduction, feted by cultural attaches and education agents, and primed by sophisticated marketing imagery to choose countries like the UK and Australia as study destinations: 'Britain is Great'; 'Australia Unlimited: Growth and Opportunity'. These market-making practices obscure the injuries endured by international students who are exposed to the predations of neoliberal regimes. Unfamiliarity with host country norms and legalities have exposed a sizeable number to banal and serious harms including wage theft, migration fraud, and sexual and racial harassment by co-nationals and host nationals (MWJI 2020; Marginson et al 2012).

'We tend to feel without history [but] what is felt has a history' (Indelicato 2018:1). In deliberating on how international education encounters might be channelled to generate cosmopolitan sociabilities and renew public diplomacy in a post-COVID world, it is important to start with emotional histories. What might we learn by

*feeling with* the recipients of 'aid' scholarships, past and present, in their navigations of mobility? Or with 'choice-exercising' international students persuaded to invest in the value of international education credentials?

Educational scholarships are normatively framed as 'gifts' to 'aid' the improvement or advancement of individuals, countries and regions. Restoring a history to the 'gift' of the scholarship is a generative move. It brings nuance and texture to understanding the limits of cultural diplomacy and 'soft power'. By way of example, Australia's *Colombo Plan*, a post-war scholarship programme, was inaugurated as a development assistance project for the newly independent countries of Southeast Asia. Less publicised was the Plan's objective to reconfigure Australia's reputation from an enthusiastic advocate of a racialized immigration regime to a benevolent and humanitarian country in the emerging moral landscapes of a decolonizing world order (Auletta 2000; Oakman 2010). Long socialised by emotional discourses of fear and anxiety about the country's racial and territorial vulnerability from an 'over-populated' Asia, Australians had to be re-educated to accept Asians. New social imaginaries had to be fashioned. In promotional pamphlets, documentaries, adult and children's literature and official speeches, metaphors of infancy sketched Asians as child-like, non-threatening and passive, seen to be growing in maturity through benevolent foreign aid programmes. Recipient countries were, naturally enough, forthcoming in interrogating these discourses but their desires to become fully sovereign by acquiring scientific, technological, industrial and administrative capacities ensured their participation (Oakman 2001).

With self-funded students eclipsing the numbers of scholarship holders for the period of its existence, the Colombo Plan became an important instrument in generating desire for an Australian education. These desires would later flourish, primed up by elaborate technologies of persuasion to amplify 'demand' from Asia. A wholesale re-modelling of 'supply' dynamics produced an 'education export industry' estimated to be worth some 25 billion EURO (AUD \$40 billion).

And so it was until the arrival of the '2019 novel coronavirus'. Looking for public support in the face of the collapse of their business models, universities have been chided for neglecting their priorities to 'educate Australians' (Tudge 2021). These and other governmental pronouncements have set in motion emotions of resentment, whittling further the prospects for public diplomacy (Bongiorno 2021). In these testing times, universities must not fall prey to fear and resentment. Their contribution to cosmopolitan sociabilities remains more important than ever before.

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