

**Lost in Transition: Redefining Students and Universities in the Contemporary Kyrgyz Republic**, by Alan DeYoung, Charlotte, NC, Information Age Publisher, 2010, xiv + 171 pp., US\$39.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-61735-230-0.

Although there is a mass of work on the transformation of universities across the world, there are few micro-political analyses of the state of higher learning as either an institution or a social activity in Central Asia. This ethnographic account of 'what it means to be a university student in the Kyrgyz Republic' is therefore a welcome contribution to higher education studies in the region and beyond. In addition to offering a grainy portrait of how and why students, teachers and parents create futures within often inhospitable and turbulent conditions, the book explores a paradoxical question that reaches beyond the borders of the republic – why pursue higher education at all, and what role do universities play in the reproduction or transformation of wider social relations?

The answers to these questions may seem obvious at first: people study to deepen their own understandings of the world, acquire advanced specialist knowledge and skills, improve their social status, change the world, or, increasingly, increase the potential value of their 'human capital' through its credentialization. However, DeYoung argues that none of these accounts for motivation to attend university in Kyrgyzstan, a country whose systems of education and labor are both in what he describes as 'catastrophically' poor condition. Indeed, he questions whether many universities in the country actually serve any of these purposes, and therefore what the idea of the university itself might be becoming. It is a puzzle. For while funding for and quality of secondary education have declined steadily since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and rates of unemployment and underemployment continue to soar, the number of universities has quadrupled and demand for higher education continues to increase. Universities are at once full of energy and hope, on the one hand, and primed for marketization and commodification on the other; producing and reproducing expectation as well as despair. Perhaps the most unsettling argument in the book is that people's beliefs in higher education as a means of social mobility are now exploited to fuel 'rent-seeking' educational businesses – and that paradoxically it is the country's officially private institutions that seem to fulfil some parts of a wider public mission for education.

DeYoung explains this through a framework of institutional function. In his argument, the latent social function of higher education to keep young people in a 'holding pattern' over probable social precarity or repression takes precedent over the its manifest academic and intellectual ones. University education in Soviet society was a privileged, specialized, academic preparation for an almost guaranteed career in a tightly managed labor system. Today, as the functional relationship between education and work is so badly out of joint, 'being a student' is defined more tautologically as the experience of having experiences while spending time at university. The book's title 'lost in transition' reflects this complex layering of problematics in which ambiguities in the transition from childhood to adulthood are shaped by ambiguities and precarities in the social institutions that frame this period of life.

*Lost in Transition* details university life in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan through a series of discussions on students' educational choices and trajectories, social life in universities, the structures of student groups within universities, the assessment of academic quality, academic labor and pedagogy, and internationalization. The first chapter provides a brief introduction to the shift from Soviet to post-

Soviet institutions in Kyrgyzstan, interpreted not as a past event but as a slow and nonlinear process of transformation of everyday life. DeYoung illustrates the tensions co-existing 'Soviet' philosophies of education, hierarchical organizational structures, state-controlled curricula and pedagogies, liberal and neoliberal theories of higher learning, informal organizational hierarchies and power relations, the defunding and privatization of universities, and the introduction of private tuition fees. The rest of the book both explores how students and teachers inhabit this complex field, and with what effects.

The second chapter discusses the findings of a survey of students' educational aspirations at five universities in Kyrgyzstan. DeYoung makes fair claims about the parameters of his method, which largely ascertained the views of 'pro-international', English-speaking students undertaking study in humanities disciplines; over three-quarters were women, and a marginal majority described themselves as ethnically Kyrgyz. Some demographics of this limited population reflect wider global patterns in education inequality: students from the north of the country are overrepresented, and only a small proportion had parents who did not have a higher degree. Perhaps most significantly, the survey indicated that two-thirds of students live with relatives, that parents and relatives paid the tuition fees for more than three-quarters of the students surveyed, and that most students aspired to attend one of the country's private universities. In other words, while ideologies of individualized 'student choice' in educational markets are misleading in a society where education 'seems to be at least as much a family affair as it is an individual opportunity', such collective futures are increasingly oriented towards investment in privatized education.

The third and fourth chapters, based on DeYoung's work in Kyrgyzstani universities, offer more ethnographic insight into social life inside the institutions. Chapter three includes brief discussions of elements of student life such as fashion, hang-outs, internet cafes, student services and the like. Chapter four, which focuses on a single Faculty of Foreign Languages, offers a critique of the university system, namely, that while many students pay tuition and many universities offer 'learning resources' in return, it all seems a bit of a front for nothingness. The poverty of intellectual life contrasts with the aggressive marketing that universities undertake to recruit students, which includes a peddling of 'anything international', a more pernicious strategy of 'bait and switch' (such as displaying high-quality materials that obscure institutional underfunding), and what sounds like an even scarier tactic of promising students opportunities for foreign travel that have the potential to result in either disappointment or legal catastrophe. Chapter four ends on a bitter note, with a student reflecting that the uselessness of his university education was balanced by the fact that he was 'having a nice time hanging out in Bishkek'.

Chapter five draws on interviews with veteran educators to explore why many parents of students in Kyrgyzstan seem to place such high value on university education even while they, their children and their children's instructors have little faith in the quality of teaching and a strong sense of declining academic standards. Although there are nuances in experience, many parents seem to send children to university as a strategic act of duty and care which affords a reprieve from precarity and the promise of a better future. Chapter six fleshes this out with students' stories about their social lives, instructors' stories about the conditions of academic work and, overall, hopes for the university itself. Not surprisingly, the motivations for teaching and studying in universities in Kyrgyzstan are revealed to be inordinately complex. What is more surprising is that in the severity of the present

social conditions, DeYoung can identify almost no combination of factors other than individualized fortunes that might contribute to the systematic development of robust academic cultures within universities in Kyrgyzstan. Chapter seven concludes by offering some reflections on the politics of internationalizing universities and summarizes the argument that the shift from 'manifest' to 'latent' functions of higher education is redefining the idea of the university in Kyrgyzstan.

In all, *Lost in Transition* draws on a wide range of research methods and personal experience to offer insights into the micro-politics of universities in Kyrgyzstan and begins to link these to more systemic questions about the organization, purpose and future of the country's higher education system. On one level, DeYoung seems to paint a bleak picture of broken institutions and ideas, of economic and intellectual poverty, and of a deep-rooted cynicism about the social mission of the university as an ideal. As there is little reference to wider literatures on the sociology or politics of higher education today, it could perhaps be too easy for readers to forget that many of the issues raised are not entirely specific to Kyrgyzstan. On another level, however, he weaves a rich tapestry about how young people, higher educators and parents are redefining the purposes of higher education in a society where its possibilities are no longer clear or guaranteed, highlights the enduring faith of a society in the promises of education, and reveals the complexities of social life that are playing out in the spaces and times of 'being a student'. Those interested in the provocative questions that DeYoung poses throughout the book, and in the linkages between the politics of higher education in Kyrgyzstan, labor, and the global struggles to reclaim the 'manifest functions' of the university worldwide, are advised to read and develop his work.

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