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Book Review: Crossing Borders: International Women Students In American Higher Education

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Crossing Borders: International Women Students In American Higher Education.
2009. Dongxiao Qin. Lanham, MD: University Press of America. 190 pages, including
appendices, tables, and index. \$32.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Susan Iverson¹ and Yu-Hui Chou.²

The number of Asian students attending U.S. colleges and university continues to grow, and China rivals India for the country that sends the largest number of students to American campuses (*Open Doors*, 2009). Thus, Qin's study of Chinese women studying in universities in the United States is incredibly timely. More than a descriptive study of these women's experiences, Qin's book, *Crossing Borders: International Women Students In American Higher Education*, draws upon cultural feminist theories of women's self development to interpret and illuminate Chinese women's senses of self as they 'cross' geographic, cultural, and psychological borders to study in the U.S.

Qin makes transparent her relationship to the project under study; she was a Chinese student, who sixteen years prior to initiating this investigation, left China to study in the U.S. In this spirit, we situate ourselves relative to this review. Iverson, a university faculty member, has personal experience as a 'border crosser' but within culturally similar places (U.S. to Ireland). She teaches a graduate course on identity development, and has specific interest in women's identity and cognitive development. Chou, a Chinese doctoral student from Taiwan who is studying in the U.S., is conducting research on the intersections of class and gender on Taiwanese children's gender identity.

Relative to identity development theories broadly, and gender identity specifically, Qui's study makes an important contribution to the literature. While the number of Chinese women attending U.S. higher education grows, limited studies have investigated their experiences and identity development. For instance, Ojano Sheehan and Pearson (1995), in their quantitative study of psychosocial development of Asian international and American freshmen, identified differences in students' psychosocial development, but no gender differences. However, they acknowledged the need to study students from individual countries and not as a conglomerate; to employ qualitative approaches that also investigate the impact of culture; and to further explore gender – all providing a launch pad for Qin's study.

Crossing Borders is comprised of 6 chapters. The introduction offers an overall view of the structure of the book, describes the globalization and changing demographics of U.S. higher education, answers the question "why Chinese women?", and foregrounds the author's theoretical frameworks. Qin, critical of the over-generalizations of cultural psychologists who contrast Western with Eastern theories of self-development, delved into non-Western psychology that understands the self as a social being nested within, not set apart from, webs of relationships. Such views better align with collectivist perspectives nurtured by Confucius philosophy. Introduced to relational cultural and feminist theories of women's self development in her doctoral studies, Qin adopted a

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critical stance to interrogate the gender neutrality of self in Western psychology in an effort to lay bare how culture is not neutral. Yet, while Qin does acknowledge how culture is grounded in material relations of power, she could have gone further to illustrate the implications of this for women, within Chinese and U.S. culture.

Qin, in chapter 2, provides comprehensive coverage of the theoretical models of self development and explicates how her approach, a hybrid methodology, is informed by feminist, postmodern, critical, socio-cultural, Confucian, and symbolic interactionist, among other theoretical perspectives. Yet, the concepts of the Chinese self as "webs of relationship" and Western self as a "container" are key points (18) and warrant further interpretation surrounding why females within Confucian thought have a greater burden to resist in terms of traditional gender roles. The theoretical review in this chapter also does well to set the stage for chapter 3 in which Qin explores the connection between the research problem and her use of grounded theory to conduct this study.

In chapter 3, Qin describes the methods of her study. Her findings emerged from analysis of interview data. Qui interviewed eleven Chinese women graduate students studying different disciplines in U.S. universities. A combination of snowball and theoretical sampling procedures were employed to purposefully achieve a saturated sample of eleven. Her interviews, referred to as "conversations with a purpose," enabled her to hear how participants "make meaning of their experiences as students from their culture of origin [mainland China] to the host culture" (53). However, as readers, we wanted know more about the institutional context from which the participants were recruited. What was the demographic picture and the campus culture of the five private and state U.S. universities? Students, domestic or international, have very different experiences and a reader (and the author) should be cautious to infer that these women, attending graduate schools in the greater Boston area, would have transferrable experiences to those in other parts of the U.S. While qualitative research, by design, does not set forth to make generalizable claims, Qin's dichotomous positioning of "host culture" relative to "culture of origin" suggests (perhaps unwittingly) essential characteristics of each cultural domain. The postmodernist deconstruction approach, which Qin identifies as foundational to her thinking and analysis (32-3), is able to account for multiple perspectives and identities, as well as diversities and differences between and within people and groups. However, this text, which embraces "a more plural understanding of women instead of woman" (33), would benefit from a deeper interrogation of assumptions embedded within beliefs about the existence of one coherent "host culture."

In chapter 4, Qin lets the voices of her participants tell the story. Of note, however, we found ourselves revisiting chapter 3, in which Qin described her sample of eleven women; yet, the findings chapter reports data from more than 11 women. Qin acknowledges (64) that part of the content of chapter 4 was published in the article authored by Qin and Lykes, an article that reports findings from interviews with 20 Chinese graduate women; however, this raises questions about the sample size.

In her findings, Qui reports that Chinese women graduate students "reweave a fragmented self," and consistent with her weaving metaphor, Qui uses chapter 4 as her loom to thread together the interview data; in this chapter that comprises nearly half the text, Qui lets the participants' experiences yield a tapestry that is both simple and

complex. Her findings suggest “a series of processes by which these Chinese women graduate students developed a critical understanding of culture and self within the context of cultural mobility” (149). Qui theorizes a major process of self-understanding, termed “reweaving a fragmented web of self,” under which exist three sub-processes: weaving self, fragmenting self, and reweaving self. The first, “weaving self,” captures the process through which participants “have woven their family traditions, education, and cultural values into their ways of being and becoming when they grew up in the web of social relations situated in Chinese socio-cultural context” (66). The next sub-process, “fragmenting self,” was located in Chinese women graduate students’ experiences of “the social injustice and the depressing personal life embedded in contemporary Chinese society” leading them to “deconstruct the stable and unified traditional ways of being into multi-faceted senses of self” (76). In this section, participants share stories of gender discrimination, low self-esteem, personal insecurities, failed relationships, and regret, along with imagining and anticipating the hope and possibilities of life in America. This process, Qui illustrates, extends from “culture of origin to the host culture” as women encounter “new psychological conflicts” (95), including loneliness, self-doubt, disrespect, and continued gender discrimination, now coupled with racial and ethnic discrimination. The third and final sub-process is “reweaving self” which Qui describes as “how these women participants re-examined and re-put together the previously fragmented facets of self to create a new and expanded web of self in the host culture” (116). At this point, I (Iverson) was struck by the resonance with several other developmental theorists whose work had not been explored in her review of development theories. For instance, Phinney (1990), in her theorizing about ethnic identity development, describes similar phenomena of individuals moving from an unexamined ethnicity, to ethnic identity search/moratorium phase, and ultimately to achieved ethnic identity. In the first phase, an unexamined ethnicity, an individual has not engaged in exploring their ethnicity, much like the woven self. The second phase involves an exploration of cultural values, typically triggered by some challenge to self. Finally, in the final phase, an individual makes a commitment to their ethnic group.

As noted above, Qui falls short in complicating and unpacking notions surrounding culture. Qin states “The post-modern feminist attention to the changing context is of value to interpret these women students’ fragmented senses of self in different socio-cultural contexts” (158). Yet, as Qin describes women as fragmented, she is also unwittingly essentializing Chinese women, positioned dichotomously against (presumably) U.S. women, in the same way she situates “host culture” opposite “culture of origin.” In this way, we felt she didn’t go far enough in utilizing the expressed value of postmodern feminist thought to interpret socio-cultural context. In her findings, Qui describes how two participants articulate the ways in which their racial identities are embedded in their lived experiences in the host culture, meaning race became salient once in the U.S. Qui further extends this point when she observed how students’ “expanded sense of self... depended on the diversity of the U.S. campuses, which raised these women students’ cultural awareness and enhanced their sense of cultural pride as being one among many different others” (151). By implication, if Chinese women’s “expanded sense of self... depended on the diversity of the U.S. campuses” then their increased cultural awareness would be less likely to emerge on campuses that are less

diverse, or if they had not crossed borders at all? Presumably not. However, Qui did not explore this implication.

For the complexity of the analytic framework, informed by social constructionist, phenomenological, symbolic interactionist, socio-cultural, cultural feminist, and postmodern perspectives, we were left wanting more from Qin's theoretical implications. Qin states that "Given the absence of much attention to the interlocking dimensions of race, class, gender, and power in dominant feminist self theories, further research on self understanding among women of color is crucial" (159). We were surprised by the author's indication of an absence in feminist theorizing. Qin fails to incorporate important and relevant work from the previous three decades that has illuminated the "the plurality in each of us" (Lugones, 1987: 3), the "interlocking categories of experience" (Andersen & Collins, quoted in West & Fenstermaker, 1995: 13), the multidimensionality of identity (Reynolds & Pope, 1991; Rutherford, 1990), living "at the intersection" of identity (West & Fenstermaker, 1995: 13; Crenshaw, 1991), and what Phelan calls the need for "specificity" to understand "the interlocking or simultaneous grids of oppression and hierarchies" experienced by individuals as members of multiple groups (Phelan, 1994: 12). Perhaps more accurately, Qin might have called attention to the absence of studies on Chinese women in identity development theories informed by a feminist perspective and the need for continued research to understand the experiences international students relative to dominant identity development theories. Overall, we felt that Qui's feminist lens was not as prominently evident throughout analysis and interpretation as it had been foregrounded.

In sum, *Crossing Borders* makes an important contribution. Qui amplifies the stories of an under-studied population that is growing in numbers on U.S. campuses. Yet, Qui also leaves us with many questions: What is the role of culture in shaping and producing different lived experiences on campuses? How do educational opportunities, job opportunities, other dimensions of identity (i.e. social class), and family structures support or hinder Chinese women graduate students' developmental needs and growth? What is the relationship between Chinese women graduate students' "reweaving" themselves and engaging as agents of change to 'interrupt' the gendered power structures from which they are constituted? In what ways does the woman, who has rewoven a fragmented self, challenge stereotypes of Asian women as obedient, and what are the implications of this for traditional gender roles as Chinese women graduate students return to their "culture of origin"? What developmental readiness is foundational for Chinese women graduate students to initiate the "reweaving" process, and what are implications, developmentally, for undergraduate female students? Qui has provided a springboard for continued dialogue and research for these and other questions.

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