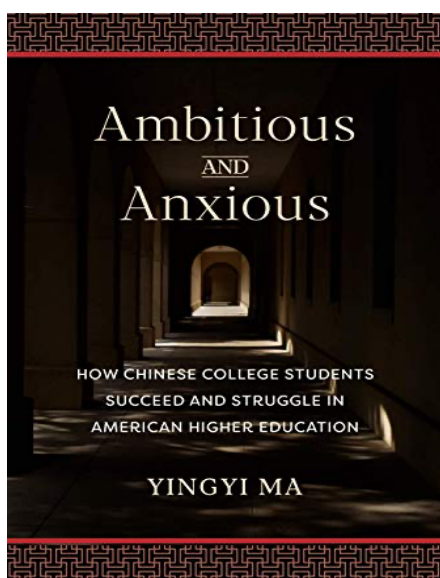




Book Review

Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education, by Yingyi Ma, Columbia University Press, 2020, 294 pp., \$34.49 (Hardcover), ISBN 978023154588



It's not uncommon to hear universities and colleges proudly tout the various achievements of their international alumni, centering their attention on the rigorous academic preparation received on their campuses that led to these success stories. Some scholars, however, take a step back and examine the forces in play prior to students' arrival in their host institutions, formative experiences that shape their academic performances and attitudes for better or for worse. Chinese students have much in common with their international student peers but, at the same time, manifest characteristics unique to this student population. For example, scholars such as Bartlett and Fischer (2011), Moore-Jones (2022), and Stevens (2012) have discussed the context of Chinese students' perceived disengagement on American campuses. And while some educators might reach the conclusion that these tendencies are here to stay, it is paramount to realize the behaviors presented in U.S. college settings have a complex backstory.

Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education uncovers numerous aspects of Chinese international students' cultural, social, and educational experiences influencing their actual performance in American higher education. In this book, which relies on mixed methods findings, Ma delves into the experiences of U.S.-based Chinese undergraduates and insists the emerging need to study abroad has become the new gospel in China, pre-empting the traditional path of the Gaokao exam, or China's version of the American SAT assessment.

Ma calls for a paradigm shift that can potentially embrace international students' experiences and contributions to higher education. Rather than a mere focus on how the "agency of international students effectively moves beyond the deficit discourse" (p. 10), the author puts this agency in context and posits that the process of international students' self-formation while abroad arises from educational, cultural-social backgrounds and, in the case of Chinese international students, from the profound social changes that have occurred both in China and internationally. With this position in mind, and for them to reap the desirable academic, social, and cultural benefits associated with Chinese student education, it is critical that educators of international students in the United States, especially, understand the current wave of Chinese students, unlike older generations, have "fresh and unique characteristics that may not fall within the realm of the expectations of Americans" (p. 10).

After a presentation in Chapter 1 of the need to understand the social transformation of Chinese society as well as an overview of the mixed-methods study, Chapter 2 walks readers through "the motivations of studying in the United States and the process of college choice" (p. 23). Through her firsthand view as a



former Chinese student in the United States, Ma showcases her familiarity with topics and western media stories that have shaped the thinking of Chinese parents and, therefore, impacted the choices and beliefs of their children. Using quantitative and qualitative findings, the author examines the sources of parents' anxiety and ambition, including the Gaokao exam; disappointing injustices from the educational and societal milieu (e.g., discrimination against children who are high achievers yet poor); and the fame associated with studying in and/or earning a degree from the United States. After a thorough elucidation in Chapter 3 of the four pathways of Chinese student arrival in U.S. institutions (including their pursuit of American high school education), the author presents the students' reflections on the Chinese and American educational systems before examining in Chapter 5 issues of their social integration.

Chapter 6 describes the opportunities and flexibility Chinese students enjoy in American institutions, ranging from the freedom to choose, change, and even double-major in STEM to the ineluctable encounter with Americans' expressive individualism which they were unused to in their collectivist-oriented society, where "[the] parents and teachers made almost all [the] decisions" (p. 184) for their "little emperors." Post-graduation dilemmas might also ensue, including perplexity over new attitudes and dispositions toward the United States and China as well as a quandary over staying or returning to the home country (Chapter 8), which is followed by a discussion of the students' plans after graduation (Chapter 9). Finally, aspects of the research design and data collection are discussed in depth in a section titled "Appendix on Methodology: Data Collection."

The author eloquently delineates how the test-oriented education system in China inhibits speaking and engagement with the community, which puts these students at a disadvantage while pursuing their studies abroad, especially when the external support they are used to, suddenly begins to evaporate upon their arrival. The role of the U.S. media in reinforcing the stereotypes about Chinese student profiles (i.e., what they can and what they can't do) seems to only worsen the situation, as depicted in the book. Therefore, two chapters may be especially intriguing for ESL teachers in American high schools and college intensive English programs (IEPs), where most Chinese undergraduates begin their education. Using findings from the survey and quotes from students, Ma discusses factors that may explain Chinese students' reticence to speak in American classrooms. In addition to the English language barrier and the influence from their parents, a major factor is Confucian societies' categorical distrust in words and discouragement of speaking "while putting a premium on actions" (p. 167). Chapter 7's section "What Can Be Done" offers practical ways to spark speaking in Chinese students. Likewise, Chapter 10 elucidates theoretical and policy implications for key units within American higher education, namely admissions, faculty support, student affairs, and career services.

A central idea of the book is Chinese students' segregation on western campuses, which appears to be a concept familiar to U.S. college officials. The latter's aspirations to internationalize their campuses might be impeded by a group of Chinese students "segregated and alienated from their U.S. peers and professors, [which] creat[es] a situation frustrating to all concerned, including the Chinese students themselves" (Stevens, 2012, p. 2). Regardless of the terminology used, protective segregation or Chinese students hanging out amongst themselves (Ma, 2020), or an isolated population "maintaining close relationships with only individuals from their own country" (Moore-Jones, 2022, p. 2), the challenge is there. But despite Ma's sophisticated lens into the concept of protective segregation, not all scholars would agree with her claim that this segregation is a voluntary process in nature, given key factors such as limited English proficiency and cultural shyness (Fox, 2020; Gareis, 2012).

Ma, to her credit, doesn't attempt to disguise misinterpretations of worldwide rankings of the Chinese educational system or Chinese students' potential. For instance, amidst the triumphant image of Chinese students topping the 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) test results ranking, Ma wondered why "662,100 Chinese students chose to study abroad [in the same year]" (2019, para. 2). That "studying abroad is no longer reserved for a few academic or economic elites" (p. 42) is one of the core themes of the book because middle-class families are trying to break the status quo by investing in their children's foreign education, hoping the latter will have a more prosperous future and of course pay back the debt incurred after their return.

Readers, however, may find several aspects of the book to be at odds with particular campus realities or overgeneralized. For example, the statement that “the most important Chinese religious holiday does not qualify as excusable” for taking leave from class (p. 196) may be true on the interviewee's campus, yet this is not the case everywhere. Many university-based intensive English programs, for instance, are aware of these cultural expectations and therefore advise ESL and content instructors to avoid high-stake assessments during the Chinese New Year. Furthermore, the author could have placed more emphasis on student accountability when academic dishonesty issues emerge. In other words, rather than expecting American institutions to exert more effort to understand Chinese students' culturally molded expectations regarding plagiarism, she could also have asserted firmly that the onus *also* falls on Chinese [and all international] students planning to study on overseas campuses, irrespective of any existing differences in educational systems. Finally, while the data was collected from undergraduate students, it would have been ideal to also include in the study graduate students' voices for a more complete picture of Chinese students' experiences in the U.S.

This book exhibits several strengths, though. The author's use of mixed-methods empirical data is one, especially when the claims made can be vividly supported by the voices of 507 online survey student respondents and 108 interviews, including adult stakeholders from Chinese high schools and U.S. institutions. The author's identity as a former Chinese student in the United States as well as her status as a professor at a respectable American university enhanced the credibility of her research and “attracted interest from Chinese students who were eager to share with [her] their experiences and sometimes confusions and anxieties” (pp. 245-246). This background can account for the author's ability to empathetically connect with and interpret the participants' cues and put in context, *inter alia*, their confused comparisons between bachelor's degrees in both countries; their disappointments in their new institutions, which, contrary to their expectations, happen to be rural; and their lack of ease making friendships with American students (Fox, 2020).

Ambitious and Anxious offers emic insights into Chinese undergraduates' experiences, particularly prior to their arrival in the U.S. Ma has successfully crafted a scholarly contribution that not only helps dismantle certain stereotypes associated with Chinese students, but also is here to stay as a valuable resource for all stakeholders interested in working with this student population.

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