

# **Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education**

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## **Abstract**

In contrast to other studies on Chinese students in American higher education, Syracuse University Professor and Graduate Study Director Ma's analysis is based on years of sociological research, including online surveys, fieldwork, and one-on-one interviews to explore the experiences of various Chinese students as individuals instead examine Chinese students as a collective. Ma looks at the goals, reflections, experiences, and future ambitions of Chinese students studying in the United States and the political, social, and economic contexts of both American and Chinese society. Examined is how these students' parents and the educational system have influenced them.

**Keywords:** *Chinese students, Book Review, Ambition, Anxiety, Higher Education, U.S.A*

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## **Introduction**

For educators, the book *Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education* by Yingyi Ma (2020) is particularly intriguing because it presents a variety of insightful interviews and research. This book captivates the attention of academics and educators and serves as a valuable resource for all progressive thinkers in comparative education, international education, educational leadership, teacher preparation, curriculum studies, sociology of education, and educational policy. Its comprehensive exploration of the challenges and triumphs experienced by Chinese students in American higher education makes it a compelling read for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of cross-cultural educational dynamics and the implications for teaching and learning.

## **Background**

Yingyi Ma, an Asian immigrant from China, is well-suited to assess how Chinese college students fare in American higher education because she has spent over 20 years exploring education and migration in both countries. In this book, she refers to some of the substantial writings she has done on the experiences of Chinese international students. As a result, the reader receives a very detailed cultural picture of Chinese students, parents, and the educational institutions of both nations. The book review is divided into two main themes introduced in the title, *Ambitious and Anxious*.

In contrast to other studies on Chinese students in American higher education institutions, the Syracuse University Professor and Graduate Study Director Yingyi Ma's, book is based on years of sociological research. The volume includes online surveys, fieldwork, and one-on-one interviews that explore the experiences of various Chinese students. Ma looks at the goals,

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reflections, experiences, and future ambitions of Chinese students studying in the United States and American and Chinese societies' political, social, and economic contexts. Ma further examines how these students' parents and the educational system have influenced them.

As a graduate student from China, I read Yingyi Ma's fascinating book through various lenses. Although I have lived in Canada since 2015, I am originally from mainland China. My parents and extended family still reside there, and I frequently travel home. Occasionally, I perceive the influence of both cultures. Since I arrived in Canada, I have been studying, first as an international student pursuing a master's degree at the University of Windsor, then as a new immigrant pursuing a Ph.D. at York University.

### **Ambition**

'Ambitious' theme is covered in chapters 1, 3, 4 and 6. Chinese international students are described in Chapter 1 as a privileged but diverse group who are ambitious but anxious to study in the United States (US), all within the background of China's dramatic social development. The "ambitious" aspect of the title is reflected in the following few chapters, which focus on why Chinese students choose to study in the United States. Chinese international students want to develop a global perspective, choose the right major to help them reach their objectives, combine the benefits of both American and Chinese education, and contribute to China or the United States in the future. They are also concerned about the competitive environment in China, the anti-immigrant climate in America, and the convoluted and unclear admission procedures of American schools.

In Chapter 3, Ma stated that in recent years, the Chinese international education sector has experienced two simultaneous streams of fresh development. One of these is the rapidly expanding international education in China's public and private sectors. The second stream refers

to a tendency among Chinese families to enroll their kids in higher education in the US after High school graduation. This chapter focuses on the effects of parental education and economic status on foreign educational pathways, including students, applying to US colleges on their own and the employment of agents in college applications.

Ma examines the perspectives of Chinese students on Chinese and American education in Chapter 4, along with their attitudes toward math, creativity, critical thinking, ability, and effort-based learning mindsets, the disconnect between precollege and college experiences, and academic integrity. She makes the case that while American education prioritizes critical thinking and creativity, Chinese education emphasizes conformity, rote memorization, and regimented curricula. In contrast, Chinese feel that effort promotes learning, while Americans believe that talent drives learning. Chinese parents intend to send their children to study overseas because “they want their children to have a quality education that transcends test scores” (Ma, 2020, p. 78). Ma contends that Chinese students tend to study harder than their American counterparts and that Confucianism influences their willingness to obey lecturers. In the meantime, some Chinese students feel lost and perplexed in the US. This is made worse if their American college is situated in a small or rural town because most incoming Chinese students come from big cosmopolitan cities.

The author highlights that in Chapter 6 wealthy Chinese overseas students frequently select science disciplines based on the likelihood of employment. Ma (2020) asserts that the “strong cultural value and social approval in studying in STEM fields in contemporary Chinese society” (p. 139) continue to be critical considerations for this group. But even in these well-known areas, she adds complexity to the picture by highlighting gender differences and socioeconomic inequities that affect each student's decision-making.

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### **Anxious**

Anxious' theme is covered in chapters 2, 5, 7, 8 and 9. For these Chinese international students, the challenges of navigating the American educational system continue after their entrance and enrolment. During their undergraduate studies, many of the students in the book faced difficulties in both their social and academic lives, which is consistent with the word "anxious" in the title. The reasons why students were excluded from American peer groups owing to neo-racism and why they voluntarily withdrew into Chinese groups due to dissatisfaction with the American economy and individualistic culture are examined by Ma in Chapter 5. Chinese students were considered boisterous and exclusively formed friendships with other Chinese students. Ma believes that “the tendency to socialize with people like oneself, identified as homophily by social scientists, is human nature” (Ma, 2020, p. 109). Chinese students find it challenging to socially navigate the individualistic, party-focused, and occasionally neo-racist campus environment.

In Chapter 7, Ma identifies the English language barrier as the primary rationale, premigration characteristics and institutional types as micro-contextual rationales, cultural differences, and the test-oriented educational system as macro contextual rationales for academic interactions, such as a lack of speaking up in class. They are aware of the value of class participation. Still, because they were raised in a society that values careful thought before speaking, and trained to answer only one question correctly, they experience extreme anxiety when they can't speak up right away. This understanding may push American teachers to adjust their teaching methods regarding classroom engagement activities.

Global citizenship attitude towards China and the United States and personal transformation are three issues examined in Chapter 8 about Chinese students' comments on their academic

programs. One important claim is that the growth of global citizenship fosters students' interest and sympathy for China while encouraging criticism of American institutions and government. However, as students “become more independent and proactive in their lives” (Ma, 2020, p. 184), they and their parents may face difficulties and disputes.

In Chapter 9, Ma (2020) discusses the decision-making process of Chinese international students, with over 60% intending to return to China after graduation. However, this binary decision of stay vs. return fails to capture the complexities of contemporary migration plans. Ma examines various factors, including US international education policy, family allure, the use of American graduate schools as a stepping stone, and opportunities in China as reasons for returning. Wealthy and ambitious students are more likely to return to China for better employment opportunities as it develops into a global superpower. Conversely, less affluent students wish to stay in the US for high starting wages to pay back their parents' investment in their education due to concerns about pollution and corruption in China.

The book's greatest strength is its integration of American and Chinese contexts to provide a vivid picture of Chinese students. Ma also offers helpful advice on how teachers, academic staff, and higher education institutions may better assist Chinese students from when they apply until they graduate. Teachers and academics noticing an increase in Chinese students in their classes are welcome to these well-intentioned proposals.

Nevertheless, despite its broad reach, the book does not address some important topics, such as mental health, academic plagiarism, concrete advice for Chinese parents or students considering studying abroad, and workable legislative recommendations to help American educational institutions better support Chinese foreign students, which in contrast, the author delineates. In addition, Ma agrees that there was positive selection bias in the online survey;

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students who agreed to be interviewed were also favourably chosen. Most of the conclusions could be more novel to Chinese domestic readers, despite the author's adequate depiction of the cultural shock and educational struggles that Chinese overseas students frequently experience. Given China and the United States' geopolitical tensions and experiences, particularly during the pandemic, future research should analyze the following: student decision-making processes regarding studying abroad, the policies or supports available in a specific institutional, regional, or global context, and why Chinese students are so excited about studying abroad. The author should look beyond the surface level social and economic factors and into the underlying logics of capital and value in international higher education.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, for Chinese international students studying in the US, the book covers most of their life decisions. From their initial decision to attend American universities, to how they behaved and felt while there, and what happens afterward by filling in the blanks with knowledge and theoretical links. Therefore, this research book can aid educators in comprehending the challenges and issues associated with global education.

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**Reference**

Ma, Y. (2020). *Ambitious and anxious: How Chinese college students succeed and struggle in American higher education*. Columbia University Press.