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Review of “Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education”

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I first assigned Yingyi Ma's *Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education* in my Global China course, not knowing how strongly it would resonate with students. One Chinese international student later told me that, for the first time, she felt truly seen by an academic book. Her reaction captures what makes Ma's work distinctive. Although there are many books on international education and student mobility, few treat Chinese international students as complex individuals with their own aspirations, struggles, and contradictions. Too often, they appear only as wealthy consumers, silent classroom participants, or symbols in geopolitical debates. Rather than reducing these students to stereotypes, Ma traces their experiences to family histories, educational trajectories, class backgrounds, and global ambitions. In doing so, she reveals the social and transnational forces that shape their choices and makes the book a must-read for scholars and educators alike.

The significance of Ma's insights became especially clear to me during my postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania. Again and again, faculty members approached me with questions about Chinese international students that they struggled to answer. One professor was particularly puzzled by students in the TESOL program who seemed far more interested in careers in “educational consulting”—helping affluent Chinese families gain admission to elite overseas schools—than in working with local immigrant communities. She described the reverse culture shock many experienced when internships placed them in ethnic enclaves teaching English to non-native speakers. Around the same time, faculty in the School of Social Policy & Practice and the Graduate School of Education told me that Chinese international students made up more than two-thirds of enrollment in some programs. Their presence transformed classrooms, bringing new perspectives, but it also generated tensions. Professors often interpreted students' silence as disengagement, while students felt misunderstood and disconnected from the curriculum. The result was a cycle of frustration on both sides. Encounters like these convinced me that understanding Chinese international students requires precisely the kind of careful, empathetic analysis that Ma provides.

To truly understand this group, Ma argues, one must trace their lives from China to the United States. Her book does so chronologically. Before arriving in the United States, why do Chinese students decide to study abroad, and how do they prepare their applications? How does social class influence where they enroll? After arrival, how do they assess the education they received in China, and how does it affect their experiences in American universities? What factors do they consider when choosing majors? What barriers do they face in forming friendships with Americans? How do social class and institutional settings influence their academic and social lives? Reflecting on their experiences, how do students believe they have changed, and how do they envision their futures? Looking ahead, how do students decide whether to remain in the United States or return to China after graduation?

Methodologically, the book draws on data collected between 2013 and 2017, including an online survey of 507 students from 50 institutions, fieldwork in nine Chinese high schools, and in-depth interviews with 65 Chinese undergraduates enrolled at U.S. universities. This mixed-methods design allows Ma to capture both broad patterns and individual narratives. The book's main argument is that Chinese college students in the United States embody a duality of ambition and anxiety. Their ambition is shaped by the global rise of China, the growing resources of Chinese middle-class families, and the belief that American higher education can provide new forms of mobility. Their anxiety arises from intense competition, unequal preparation, the pressure of navigating an unfamiliar educational system and society, and deep uncertainty about the future. Meanwhile, U.S. universities and surrounding communities increasingly depend on the tuition, consumption, and presence of this student population. Chinese students are therefore not marginal but central to American higher education and economy.

The book focuses on a new generation of Chinese students. For many urban Chinese families, studying in the United States has become a new education gospel. America appears to be a land of opportunity, while American education is imagined as a pathway to upward mobility and global competence—at least at the time Ma conducted her research. Yet, unlike previous generations, this generation is not simply seeking freedom from China or looking up to the United States and Europe as beacons of hope and democracy. Having grown up during China's economic boom, and especially amid intensified patriotic education and visible forms of political control, many younger Chinese students arrive in the United States with a strong sense of national pride. Rather than seeing themselves as people to be transformed by the West, they often understand themselves as grassroots diplomats who represent China's soft power abroad ((Guo 2026; Jiang 2021; Liu 2022).

Against this backdrop, in Chapter 2, Ma discusses how Chinese students and their families approach American education not only as a means of acquiring human capital but also as a way

of accumulating cosmopolitan capital—a new form of resource that enables students to move confidently in global arenas. This capital takes multiple forms. In embodied form, it includes fluent English speaking and writing skills, familiarity with different cultures, and the ability to interact across borders. It also includes global networks of friends and alumni that can later be converted into social and economic capital. In institutionalized form, it includes globally recognized degrees. For Chinese middle-class families, sending children abroad, especially to the United States, has thus become a key strategy for acquiring cosmopolitan capital and securing a competitive edge.

Meanwhile, Ma challenges the assumption that Chinese international students are a homogeneous elite. Their family backgrounds are actually diverse, and parents' social class has a powerful influence on students' educational trajectories (Chapter 3). Students from higher-class families are more likely to follow the most expensive pathway: beginning American education in private secondary schools and then continuing to U.S. higher education. Students from less privileged backgrounds may begin college in China and then transfer to the United States, or begin in an American community college and later transfer to a research university. Parents' social class is also positively related to students' English proficiency, which in turn shapes academic achievement and social integration (Chapters 5 and 7). College-educated parents often possess broad and intimate knowledge of higher education, and in some cases first-hand knowledge of overseas study. They also encourage their children to leave their comfort zones and make conscious efforts to socialize with Americans. These inequalities matter because students with higher academic achievement and stronger social integration are more likely to stay in the destination country after graduation (Chapter 9, pp. 210-212).

The book's contribution is multifaceted. It speaks to China studies, migration studies, and international higher education, while also carrying important implications for U.S.-China relations. I can easily see it assigned in courses such as Sociology of Education, Global China, Asian America, Youth and Society, and seminars on migration and globalization. It is equally useful for U.S. educators and policymakers seeking to better understand Chinese international students, support their integration, and provide the resources they need. For academic and non-academic readers alike, the book offers a nuanced and empathetic account of an important group that is often misunderstood.

The only major missing piece, from my perspective, is politics. Ma's book provides an empirically rich account of Chinese students' educational trajectories and experiences, but it says less about how their political views and practices change after migration, or how they form solidarity or division with other racial groups. This issue appears briefly in Chapter 8, but not enough to fully address how Chinese students change politically amid U.S.-China geopolitical tensions, rising xenophobia, and deepening political polarization. This limitation is also

historical. The research was conducted a decade ago and much has changed since then: a global pandemic, two Trump administrations, the rise of anti-immigrant policies, and now the challenges of artificial intelligence in higher education. These changes have likely reshaped Chinese students' motivations, identities, and future plans. I would therefore look forward to a longitudinal study that follows the same participants over time, as well as a comparative study of a younger generation of Chinese students, especially Gen Z students who may no longer see the United States as a desirable destination.

For now, *Ambitious and Anxious* remains the most influential book on Chinese international students in American higher education. It has inspired scholars, including myself, to further investigate how overseas Chinese students construct and negotiate their multiple identities. It also invites educators and policymakers to move beyond deficit thinking and recognize Chinese students as agentic actors who make autonomous decisions and navigate uncertainty with resilience.

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Author biography

Weirong Guo is Assistant Professor of Teaching in Sociology at the University of California, Riverside. Previously, she held postdoctoral positions at Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania. Her research examines global China, political culture, migration, race, and transnational Chinese youth. Her work asks how migration from authoritarian to democratic contexts reshapes young people's political attitudes, racial consciousness, and sense of belonging. She has published in *Social Forces*, *Social Problems*, *Cultural Sociology*, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, and *Ethnic & Racial Studies*.