

In Pursuit of American Higher Education: Agency and Struggle

Shuning Liu

Ball State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Over the recent decade, the United States has witnessed a growing influx of self-funded Chinese international undergraduate students into its university campuses. Mainstream U.S. media accounts have tended to hold unexamined stereotypes about these international students. The essay not only highlights the importance of exploring students' agency and struggle in their pursuit of international education. It also points out that to better understand Chinese international undergraduate students' ambition and anxiety, we must link their emotional and psychological burdens, their academic and social struggles, as well as their agency, to the changing national and international contexts where these students' transnational mobility is situated. This essay also calls for the need for further research into the politics of international student mobilities.

Keywords: Agency; Chinese International Undergraduate Students; Chinese Middle- and Upper-Middle Class; International Student Mobility; Politics of International Student Mobilities

Over the recent decade, the United States has witnessed a growing influx of Chinese international undergraduate students into its university campuses. As the top destination country for internationally mobile tertiary students, the U.S. hosts larger numbers of international students than other English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada (OECD, 2019). Students from China have accounted for the largest group of international students studying in the United States. Among Chinese international students in the U.S., undergraduates have outnumbered graduate students and have only recently

become a majority of this population (Institute of International Education, 2019). Different from international Chinese graduate students who often rely on full scholarships provided by American higher education institutions, the new wave of Chinese international undergraduate students is almost all self-funded. It is the self-funded Chinese international undergraduates who are the focus of Ma's (2020) recently published book *Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education*.

Although mainstream U.S. media has covered the large-scale enrollment of Chinese undergraduate students in American colleges and universities, their accounts portray these students as a socioeconomically homogeneous, privileged population. U.S. media coverage has tended to hold a negative bias towards Chinese international students by reporting fraud issues in their applications to U.S. colleges and academic integrity violations on U.S. university campuses. Ma's study challenges unexamined stereotypes about Chinese international undergraduate students in the mainstream American media through looking at students' own voices and experiences. Different from the traditional approach to the study of international students, which often explores how students adjust themselves to the host society and assimilate themselves to another culture, Ma adopts Marginson's (2014) idea of "understanding international education as *self-information*" (7). This idea highlights the importance of exploring students' agency in their pursuit of international education. As Ma (2020) elaborates, this paradigm shift "has potential to truly understand the experiences of international students and what international education brings to them" (p. 10). The focus on the agency of Chinese international undergraduates effectively moves beyond the dominant deficit discourse that attributes their struggles in American higher education to a lack of linguistic, academic, social, and cultural competence. *Ambitious and Anxious* is a fascinating, well-written, and informative book on how Chinese international undergraduate students pursue imagined American higher education and how they experience college life and struggle academically and socially on U.S. college campuses. Instead of reviewing the book chapter by chapter, I will discuss a few key themes that the book develops and some notable contributions of Ma's work. I will also highlight the areas where I felt that the book might have critically examined or where future research is needed.

To explore international students' agency, *Ambitious and Anxious* presents diverse and multifaceted experiences of Chinese international undergraduate students in American higher education. These experiences range from their preparation for the U.S. college application process in China, to their choice of college major and social challenges in the U.S., and to their post-graduation plans. Using a mixed-method research approach, the author well integrated online surveys of Chinese students in the United States with in-depth interviews with research participants to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Survey data provide broad patterns about students' demographic backgrounds, their motivations to study in U.S. colleges, their English proficiency, college major and

social integration, as well as their intentions to stay in the U.S. or return to China. In-depth interviews with Chinese international students reveal insights into a more complex and nuanced understanding of these students' college application process, their experiences and reflections about academic learning and social integration in both home and host countries, and their decision-making process of staying or returning. As Ma nicely puts it, "survey data and interview data speak to each other in both complementary and contradictory ways, and together they provide a fuller, richer, and more nuanced picture" of Chinese international undergraduate students in the United States (p. 248).

One of the important contributions of *Ambitious and Anxious* is that the book outlines the heterogeneity and commonality among Chinese international undergraduates studying in American higher education. In general, these students are from well-off families in terms of the Chinese family's capacity to afford tuition costs and living expenses at U.S. universities. Compared to domestic undergraduate students in China, these Chinese international undergraduates studying in the U.S. are a socioeconomically privileged group. However, they are privileged but diverse. They are diverse socioeconomically and academically. As the study points out, some of the students are the children of college-educated entrepreneurs, professors, doctors, or engineers. Some are first-generation college students with working-class backgrounds and their parents are taxi drivers, factory worker, or supermarket cashiers. It is misguided to simply assume that Chinese international students are uniformly rich and privileged. It is also wrong to presume that the students choose to study in U.S. colleges only because they fail in or want to escape from highly competitive Chinese education system and avoid high-stakes college entrance examination in China (commonly called the *Gaokao*). As *Ambitious and Anxious* documents, some Chinese international undergraduates are high academic achievers. They did take the *Gaokao* and scored high enough to be admitted into a top-tier Chinese university while they prepared for their applications to U.S. colleges and decided to attend a prestigious American university. Some students attended second- or third-tier college in China and then transferred to higher-ranked U.S. universities. Chinese international undergraduate students also take diverse pathways from high schools to American colleges and universities—through regular or international classes in Chinese public high schools; through private schools in China; through American high schools. Some of the pathways such as international classes created by elite Chinese public high schools has been critically examined by other scholars (e.g. Liu, 2018; Liu, 2020).

Recognizing the heterogeneous character of Chinese international undergraduate students, *Ambitious and Anxious* also identifies the duality of ambition and anxiety that these students share in common in their experiences resulted from their straddling the Chinese and American educational systems and social, cultural, and political norms in two distinct societies. As demonstrated in the book, Chinese students aspired to study at top-ranked American colleges and universities. In their pursuit of desirable universities, they encountered the

challenges of navigating the complex U.S. college admission and selection processes. They were anxious about not being able to achieve high test scores in TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test), to write strong personal statements, and to attend their preferred colleges. When studying in the United States, Chinese international students were ambitious about developing global perspectives and yearned to make American friends, but they felt marginalized and excluded socially and culturally at American universities. They were also frustrated by the gap between the imagined America and the real one. They felt comfortable and secure to stick to their circles of Chinese friends on the one hand; they were anxious about their inability to break out of their Chinese peer networks, on the other hand. Such duality of ambition and anxiety were also embodied in their choice of college major, the reflections on their reticence in American classrooms, and their post-graduation plans.

To better understand Chinese international undergraduate students' ambition and anxiety, we must link their emotional and psychological burdens, their academic and social struggles, as well as their agency, to the changing national and international contexts where these students' transnational mobility is situated. Some social, cultural, economic, and political changes in both China and the U.S. that Ma highlights in the book merit special attention. For instance, China's fast-growing economy in the past four decades has contributed to the burgeoning middle class in urban China. The emerging Chinese middle class' high expectations of their only child and their capacity to consume education abroad for their children encounter the fast internationalization of American universities affected by the 2008 Financial Crisis. U.S. visa policy changes also affect self-funded Chinese international undergraduate students' studying in American higher education. The unwelcoming political environment impacted by the Trump administration to foreigners and immigrants has increased these students' uncertainties about their futures. Such political contexts complicate the experience of Chinese international undergraduates in the U.S. This makes the book *Ambitious and Anxious* particularly valuable for American higher education institutions in providing resources and support for these students rather than retreating them as cash cows financially supporting U.S. universities (Abelmann & Kang, 2014). This policy implication, in fact, challenges American colleges and universities' ethics and commitment to such international students.

International student mobility is one of the major educational issues in an increasingly globalized world. *Ambitious and Anxious* draws from interdisciplinary scholarship, such as relevant literature from sociology, anthropology, immigration, migration studies, and communication studies on Chinese international students. As many readers of this journal know, this interdisciplinary approach to studying education issues entails challenges for researchers. Like all books, there were some places where I wish the author had gone further. Ma illustrates the complexities and contradictions inherent in the experience of Chinese international undergraduate students studying in American

colleges and universities. She argues that “the duality of ambition and anxiety is rooted in the desires of emerging middle- and upper-middle class families in China to preserve their social statuses and transmit them to the next generation” (p. 6). She mentions Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital. However, she doesn’t go further and make a critical analysis of how the privileged Chinese family’s strategy of accumulating global cultural capital through international education has the potential to exacerbate social inequality. The absence of such a critical analysis points to the need for further research into the politics of international student mobilities, which Waters (2018) calls for.

REFERENCES

- Abelmann, N., & Kang, J. (2014). A fraught exchange? US media on Chinese international undergraduates and the American university. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(4), 382-397.
- Institute of International Education (2019). *Leading places of origin fact sheets*. <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Fact-Sheets-and-Infographics/Leading-Places-of-Origin-Fact-Sheets>
- Liu, S. (2018). Neoliberal global assemblages: The emergence of “public” international high school curriculum programs in China. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 48(2), 203-219.
- Liu, S. (2020). *Neoliberalism, globalization, and “elite” education in China: Becoming international*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ma, Y. (2020). *Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Marginson, S. (2014). Student self-formation in international education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(1), 6-22.
- OECD (2019). *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en>.
- Waters, J. L. (2018). International education is political! Exploring the politics of international student mobilities. *Journal of International Students*, 8(3), 1459-1478.

Shuning Liu, Ph. D., is an Assistant Professor in Curriculum Studies at Teachers College, Ball State University. Her primary research interests are in the areas of curriculum studies, educational policy, globalization and education, comparative and international education, and qualitative inquiry. Her current research projects involve the role of international education in the formation of social elites. She is the author of the book *Neoliberalism, Globalization, and “Elite” Education in China: Becoming International* (Routledge, 2020). Email: sliu8@bsu.edu

Manuscript submitted: November 5, 2019

Manuscript revised: February 4, 2020

Accepted for publication: May 5, 2020