

Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

Volume 21 | Number 21

Article 9

2022

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

Sara Vander Bie
Calvin University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth



Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vander Bie, Sara (2022) "Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*. Vol. 21: No. 21, Article 9.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol21/iss21/9

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Association of Christians in Student Development at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.



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

Yingyi Ma (2020)
Columbia University Press
Reviewed by Sara Vander Bie, M.Ed.

88

There was one book last year that I couldn't stop talking about: Yingyi Ma's *Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education*. I couldn't help bringing it up in conversation with colleagues across campus, from the Student Success Center to the English Department to the Center for Intercultural Student Development. Ma's writing connected in so many ways. In the book, Ma challenges higher education practitioners to understand and support all students even as she deepens, in particular, understanding of undergraduates from China studying in the US. Her writing engages by weaving quantitative analysis with qualitative case study, couching statistics in the context of real student stories.

Ambitious and Anxious examines a recent shift among Chinese undergraduate students in the US. Prior to about 2014, Chinese graduate students outnumbered undergrads. In 2005 there were just 9,304 undergraduate students from China, but just ten years later, US colleges and universities welcomed 135,629 students from the same demographic, growth that Ma rightly describes as "staggering" (p. 2). Ma provides context for this increase, describing shared, formative cultural background and motivations for Chinese undergrads while honoring nuanced

student stories. Ma, a sociologist teaching at Syracuse University, is perfectly positioned to write such a book. Her understanding of Chinese and American cultures and values is grounded not only in her academic expertise but in her personal experience as a student in both China and the US.

The book begins with an overview of the anxieties and ambitions Ma observes in Chinese undergraduates studying in the US. The following chapters trace the path a Chinese college student might take in their education. Chapters explicate the context of Chinese educational culture; they reveal the myriad of decisions students in China and their families face when it comes to selecting and applying to colleges and universities; and they unpack questions that loom when a student from China graduates in the US. Readers encounter undergraduate Chinese students living in the US through interview data, conveying complex stories. These stories provide textured context for clearly presented data about each chapter's topic. Moving beyond broad brushstrokes, this pairing provides for understanding of:

- Motivations which include “instrumental” and “idealistic” considerations in Chapter 2: “A Love for Separation: Study Abroad as the New Education Gospel in Urban China”
- Different routes Chinese students take to study in US as undergrads in Chapter 3: “‘From Hello to Harvard’: The Pathways to American Higher Education”
- Changes many students navigate when studying in the US, including different responses to that change in Chapter 6: “College Major Choices, Rationales, and Dilemmas” and Chapter 8: “Changes and Reflections”
- Students’ sense of belonging in and outside the classroom in Chapter 5, “Protective Segregation: Chinese Students Hanging Out Among Themselves” and Chapter 7: “Think Before Speak: A Real Conundrum for Classroom Participation?”
- Career choices that are affected by globalization, personal goals, and family goals in Chapter 9: “Stay vs. Return: That Is the Question”

The last chapter, “What American Higher Education Needs to Know About Chinese Undergraduates,” offers guidance in fostering academic success and a sense of belonging in our learning communities for Chinese undergraduates. Each chapter closes with a succinct summary, naming key take-aways from the chapter.

Ambitious and Anxious helped me consider the experiences of Chinese undergraduates in the US from so many different perspectives, but it left me wondering about these students' spiritual lives on their academic journeys. I'm interested in learning more about the spiritual supports, challenges, and changes Chinese undergraduates experience. Research into this area would complement Ma's findings and offer insights for professionals in American higher education into supporting more holistic growth.

Even as she attends to particular individual student experiences, Ma steps back to name the larger cultural factors that serve as backdrop for these stories. The US and China have respect for the other's educational systems, but that respect sometimes displays itself in competition that might cause each country to miss out on a rare opportunity for deepened understanding of self and other. The US is respected by many in China for fostering critical thinking and promoting global citizenship. Beyond that, Chinese graduates from well-known American institutions have more career opportunities available. On the other hand, Ma reminds her readers how many in the US respect China's educational system for their students who are high achieving and hard working.

Ma helps us imagine how the US and China might learn from one another, not just compete to beat each other. Especially in this cultural moment when the political, cultural, economic relationship with China is in the news so often, Ma's book feels timely. She invites the kind of personal reflection that could lead to a more humble posture in our educational context. In the Student Life division, we might become better welcomers when we examine the cultural underpinnings that students from China share and recognize the different paths each have traveled to arrive in the US as students. For faculty and staff cultivating classroom space, Ma's book challenges us to see anew and reckon with our own cultural underpinnings—complete with postures and perspectives about our identity as American educators. We might see our students more clearly, too, recognizing strengths among students from China, born of "perseverance, persistence, effort based learning" (p. 108), but also recognizing the flip side of those strengths: difficulty engaging in academic activities that require more creativity and critical thinking. For instructors and academic support counselors alike, Ma's book helps us see the "cultural and institutional barriers" (p. 133) that exist for Chinese undergrads as well as ways we can support holistic bridging to our learning communities.

I'm encouraged by Ma's book: We can make changes in our personal, day-to-day work and in local educational structures to better welcome students from China. In so doing, I hope we can be leaders in developing truth and nuance in shared attitudes toward students from China in our educational communities, and more broadly. Learning—reading books like Ma's—seems a good place to start in this incremental change toward those larger goals.

Sara Vander Bie is an ESL Instructor and Academic Counselor in the Center for Student Success at Calvin University.