

Acknowledgments

I first set foot in the United States almost twenty years ago, right after attaining my bachelor's degree in China. At that time, the only way that I knew for students like me to come to America was through graduate school, fully funded by American higher education.

I started teaching in a private research university around 2006, nestled in a quiet and almost never-changing town in upstate New York. Over time there has been a noticeable influx of Chinese undergraduate students, adding to the town's vitality and sparking a boom in Asian restaurants and grocery stores that cater to them. These students are almost all self-funded. Now, nationwide, the Chinese undergraduate population studying in the United States has exceeded their graduate peers. What accounts for this change is, in no small way, rooted in the rise of China over the past two decades.

This change is what motivated this book: Chinese international students embody a new China, and their experiences in the United States are inextricably linked to their social, cultural, and educational backgrounds in rapidly transforming China.

When I started this project in 2012, American media covered this phenomenon with a strong focus on the wealth of this new generation of Chinese students studying abroad, as if they were uniformly rich. Since the Trump administration came into power, Chinese international students are now under suspicion, often labeled as potential spies. As a result, these students' voices have been silenced and their experiences obscured. The scrutiny has dehumanized them.

It is my hope that this book will provide a more balanced and nuanced portrait of this new wave of Chinese students. They are not the inhabitants of an elite academic preserve, as they used to be; nor are they just failing in or fleeing from the ultra-competitive Chinese education system. They are as diverse academically as they are socioeconomically. They are the sons and daughters of entrepreneurs and engineers, doctors and drivers, professors and programmers. They are the children of a new China, one characterized by a duality of phenomenal ambition and anxiety, and they embody this duality.

This project is my post-tenure labor of love. I owe tremendous gratitude to all the people who helped bring it to fruition. First and foremost, I thank all of the study participants—students in colleges and high schools harboring the aspiration to study in America—and all of the educators involved in international education who devote their careers to the still nascent international education sector in China. I am truly grateful for their generosity and their tremendous trust in this project, as well as their commitment to education.

I am also indebted to the Maxwell School Dean's Office at Syracuse University for naming me the inaugural O'Hanley Faculty Scholar from 2014 to 2017, which provided me with three years of extra research funding. Research projects such as this one are rarely considered a funding priority by American funding agencies, so this financial support was both timely and immensely helpful.

I want to thank my dear colleagues and friends Amy Lutz, Madonna Harrington Meyer, Terry Lautz, and Jerry Miner at Syracuse University's Maxwell School. Our many coffees and lunches not only stimulated my mind, but also spiced up an otherwise bland academic routine. My mentors Lingxin Hao, Karl Alexander, and Andrew Cherlin at Johns Hopkins University not only invited me to return to my alma mater to give a talk about this project in the early stages of research and writing, but also read multiple chapters of the manuscript. Their feedback was both pithy and profound. Dear friends Vivian Louis at Hunter College and Hua-Yu Sebastian Cherng at New York University took precious time to read chapters of this book and give me comments that have significantly improved it as a whole.

Several research assistants along the way were involved in this project. My former graduate student Yue Zhang, who is now blazing her own academic path in child and family studies, was involved in the project from

conception to finish. I have no doubt that she will have a stellar academic career ahead. Undergraduate research assistants Ashley Han, Alex You, and others helped update the study's statistics and recruit diverse participants. Their passion and support helped sustain me through the countless hours of work on this book.

Eric Schwartz, the executive editor at Columbia University Press, took the plunge to sign this project when it was not quite yet in shape. The trust and confidence he bestowed on it shines through the final text here. I want to thank associate editor Lowell Frye, production editor Kathryn Jorge, and Cenveo project manager Ben Kolstad for their kind professionalism in the final stages of this project to bring it to completion. I also want to thank my personal editor, Henry Jankiewicz. Henry taught me how to treat writing as a craft and approach it with patience and precision.

I am highly appreciative to anonymous reviewers of the book proposal and the book manuscript. Their critiques and comments have undoubtedly sharpened my focus and crystallized some key themes in the writing of the manuscript. In addition, the Columbia design team is marvelous. The book cover is nothing but amazing: it perfectly reveals the mood and theme of the book in a way that only the eye of an artist could capture.

As a former international student, I too have had a journey punctuated with ambition and anxiety. This journey has been made much easier and even enjoyable by my husband Ying Lin, my companion at every step of the way. He was also once an international student from China. Trained in the natural sciences, he is gifted with intellectual curiosity and incredible insight into social issues. His quick wit and dry humor make me laugh daily. Our many conversations inspire me and lighten our journey together.

Our son—Jayden Ma Lin, now nine years old—saw me working on this book for a majority of his life. I could hardly escape from the “working-mom syndrome” of guilt and self-doubt, since much of my time was consumed with this book rather than with him, until one day he gave me a pleasant surprise. He had also started writing a book—a little notebook comprising cartoons he drew and a few words he could spell out for the storyline. At that moment, he was just starting second grade and was poised to be a budding writer. He even seriously proposed we have a race: “Mommy, let’s have a race and see who can write more books.” I laughed hysterically. I am so gratified to see that the writing of this book has had some positive influence on him.

My dear parents, tens of thousands of miles away, are the ultimate anchor for me. Quite ordinary socioeconomically, they are truly among the most extraordinary parents of their generation in China. They respect my voice and choices, and rarely do they even try to make me into a person I am not. Their attitude towards life—laughing constantly and self-deprecating occasionally—grounds me both at home and in the world. Although we are far apart physically, I can feel their love each and every day. Their support is the backbone of my life. For that, I am eternally grateful and thus I dedicate this book to them.

Ambitious and Anxious

