

or Western business players interact differently with Uganda's patron–client system from their Chinese counterparts, and with what kind of different consequences?

That said, *Ugandan Agency within China–Africa Relations* remains a fascinating study of African elites' political manoeuvres in an increasingly diversified landscape of international development. It is suitable for undergraduate and graduate courses on South–South cooperation, China–Africa, Chinese foreign policy and African politics, among others. Its jargon-light writing style also renders it accessible to anyone curious about the ever-shifting field of China–Africa relations.

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## Study Gods: How the New Chinese Elite Prepare for Global Competition

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Zachary M. Howlett

Yale-NUS College, Singapore

Email: [zachary.howlett@yale-nus.edu.sg](mailto:zachary.howlett@yale-nus.edu.sg)

Yi-Lin Chiang's *Study Gods* is an insightful ethnography of elite Beijing high-school students, focusing on their aspirations to become members of the "global elite." The book examines the status hierarchy within Beijing high schools and shows how students, parents and teachers reproduce it. Innovatively, Chiang's study contains a longitudinal dimension: after conducting ethnographic fieldwork in schools for 15 months from 2012 to 2014, she carried out follow-up research on her 28 core research subjects, most of whom pursued graduate school or careers in the US and UK. This approach enables her to show how the strategies her subjects learned in high school facilitate their pursuit of transnational elite status later in life. She argues that "elite Chinese youths are systematically successful in the competition for global elite status by becoming 'study gods' (*xue-shen*), a term they use to describe exceptionally high-performing students" (p. 4).

Highly readable, *Study Gods* promises to have broad appeal. It would be appropriate for introductory as well as advanced courses and will appeal to scholars of education beyond Chiang's native discipline of sociology – including anthropologists and comparative educationists – as well as anyone interested in looking inside the black box of elite Chinese education.

A distinguishing characteristic of Chiang's study, which joins several other recent ethnographies of high school life in China, lies in its focus on elite students in Beijing, arguably some of the most privileged youth in China. Chiang's methodology combines ethnography and interviews. She shadowed students in two elite high schools, including home stays with several subjects, followed by in-depth interviews. For a broader perspective, she interviewed her subjects' teachers and parents as well as speaking with students at other elite Beijing high schools. Her follow-up research, carried out transnationally over subsequent years, included visiting subjects in their later places of study and work.

Her central arguments are well supported by her ethnographic data. As elsewhere in China, status hierarchy revolves around test performance. Students in the so-called domestic departments of these schools focus on the national college entrance examination, or *gaokao*, whereas students in the international departments take an American-style curriculum and prepare for the "American

*gaokao*,” or SAT. In both departments, the greatest status belongs to the “study gods,” who combine top results with the appearance of effortless. These are followed by “studyholics” (*xueba*), who gain top results with visible effort, and “underachievers” (*xuezhā*), who neither work hard nor do well. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the “losers” (*xueruo*), who expend intense effort but fail to achieve. In comparing *Study Gods* with my own observations of high-school life in rural and urban schools in Fujian province (*Meritocracy and Its Discontents: Anxiety and the National College Entrance Exam in China*; Cornell University Press, 2021), what stands out most about Chiang’s subjects is their fixation on presenting themselves as performing with effortless, supposedly in-born intelligence, whereas students from peripheral places and low-ranking schools usually place greater value on diligence.

The book consists of an introduction, six ethnographic chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter one presents the field sites and the context of elite education in China. Chapter two introduces the status hierarchy. Chapter three explores the charisma of top-scoring students. Chapters four and five show how teachers and parents contribute to study gods’ sense of entitlement. Chapter six examines how parents step in to save these gods when something goes wrong. The conclusion lays out broader comparative reflections about meritocracy.

As Chiang notes, Beijing contains the lion’s share of the nation’s top colleges – including its two best, Tsinghua and Peking. Preferential quotas give Beijing residents better chances of admission to these top institutions. Roughly 100 out of 10,000 Beijing *gaokao* examinees enter Tsinghua or Peking. By contrast, the quota is around 10 out of 10,000 for Shanghai or Tianjin examinees and just a few out of 10,000 elsewhere. These distorted quotas mean that people from peripheral places must work harder and score higher to achieve similar results. Because many Beijingers cannot outperform their peers from peripheral places, they find themselves demoted in their own hierarchy. To maintain self-esteem, they redefine studyholics as inferior to underachievers, claiming that the supposed well-roundedness of urban students makes them better than their rural counterparts (pp. 59–61).

Chiang adds to transnational studies following youths in their transitions to higher education and work, such as Vanessa Fong’s *Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest for Flexible Citizenship in the Developed World* (Stanford University Press, 2011) and Fran Martin’s *Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students in the West* (Duke University Press, 2022). In comparison to Fong’s book, which examines ordinary middle-class subjects from Dalian, Chiang’s subjects are more elite. And whereas Martin illuminates the lives of Chinese students overseas, Chiang focuses more on their origin stories in elite schools.

Chiang’s rich ethnography suggests several directions for further research. Typically, many elites who choose to go overseas for college do so because they underperform on Chinese examinations. Future studies might further explore differences between those who choose the *gaokao* versus those who go overseas and how, if at all, these differences affect their conceptions of status. Also, many of Chiang’s subjects seem to have intergenerational histories of mobility, with parents having migrated from peripheral places to Beijing and now aspiring to send their children to transnational destinations. As China’s economic and political macro-environments become less conducive to elite status reproduction, increasing numbers of Chinese elites are building lives abroad. Future research will build on Chiang’s fascinating ethnography to investigate how Chinese elite mobility regimes are transforming in an era of slowing growth and geopolitical uncertainty.

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