

The World of Education Podcast

Episode 1.7: Study Gods and Losers

Guest: Yi-Lin Chiang, Associate Professor, National Chengchi University

*This week's guest on the [World of Higher Education Podcast](#) is Yi-Lin Chiang, author of *Study Gods: How the New Chinese Elite Prepare for Global Competition* which was published in 2022 by Princeton University Press. It's a really extraordinary work of ethnography, following a group of students from a pair of elite Beijing secondary schools as they make their way towards China's extremely challenging Gaokao system and on to university in China and beyond. I [reviewed it a few months ago](#) and I was so pleased that Yi-Lin could join us on the pod.*

To me, it is interesting not only as a window into the lives of some extremely driven young students whose lives revolve around high-stakes testing (I recommend pairing this book with the Indian Netflix show [Kota Factory](#) if you get the chance – there are some interesting parallels), but also as a means to understand how these students come to understand complex ideas like “merit”, “excellence” and “prestige” and then orient their values around them. Her description of how students get placed in a social status system running from “losers” to “study gods” is itself worth the price of the book.

What I found most interesting in this interview was when we came to the issues of ideology and values. How does an allegedly communist system force this level of competition and status stratification on students? And why don't parents rebel at the high financial and social costs the system imposes on them, like mothers quitting their jobs to devote themselves to full-time care of teens so they can maximize their studying time? Her answers – that China is less Communist than it seems, and that parenting values change a bit in families with only a single child were, I thought, pretty astute.

But judge for yourself – [have a listen](#).

Alex Usher: Yi-Lin, welcome and thanks for being on the show.

Yi-Lin Chiang: Thank you.

AU: The book that you've written is based on work you did observing students at two elite secondary schools, both I think in Beijing, which you've pseudonymized as Pinnacle and Capital. What can you tell us about these schools? How easy is it to get in? What are the fees like? What amenities do they have that other schools don't?

YC: That's a lot of things to answer. These two schools are public schools in the western side of Beijing. Because they're public schools, the fees are very little. It's about 750 Chinese Yuan or renminbi per semester. That was 10 years ago, nowadays it's probably about 800 per semester. Of course, students who go to those schools can't just pay the fees, they need to test in to those schools. So, these schools have a Zhongkao which is a high school entrance exam that they use to select students and students need to score among the top in the city to get in. There are a few quotas that students could go in if they have scored a few points below the cutoff, and those students would have to pay a so-called “school selection fee.” It depends on the school and it also depends on how much points that the students need to make up for, but it's really not that much compared to compared the other international schools. So, parents usually are happy to pay it, but

the slots are very few, so it's a first come, first serve or depending on what strength the parents get pulled. Other than that, I think the school's amenities varies quite significantly between Capital and Pinnacle. So Pinnacle is a school that I would think goes for more of an elegant style. It has a historical vibe inside. The campus is not that big. It has large sculptures and I mean, it even has pavilions inside the campus. Capital is quite different. Capital was established later than Pinnacle. It goes for a more of a cosmopolitan vibe. The huge campus is modeled after Harvard University with red brick buildings and lots of open space. Capital campus could even fit a rollercoaster, which the students asked the school to bring in to the campus for them during a celebratory event. So, the two schools are pretty much elite. They're not that similar in terms of campus style but overall because they're public schools, so the fees and admission policies are all quite comparable.

AU: How did you get access to these schools to do your research. Once you were inside, how did you choose which students to follow?

YC: I went into the school by asking friends and family, friends to introduce me to people who knew teachers in the school. Very quickly I realized that teachers alone were not enough to get access to the schools. So then I had to ask some friends to introduce me to the school principal and ask for permission to enter the schools. Going into the schools actually wasn't that hard. It was more difficult to stay inside the school because a lot of times [people thought] that I'm there to do your research and then I'll leave upon like a month or a semester. But in fact, I was trying to stay for over a year, and so I had to build a really good relationship with the homeroom teachers that the principal introduced me to. Those homeroom teachers actually introduced me to selected students who they thought were best to represent this school. I only asked the teachers to introduce me to students who were elite, meaning that they were from rich families or they came from affluence. But the teachers added other things such as they think this person needs to be nice or this person needs to be sociable or at least outgoing, and most importantly, they need to be high performers as to bring honor and glory to the school through research participation, then got to know other students through these selected students introduced to me.

AU: The context for all of this: for these schools and for the work the students are doing in your book is this obsession that that the elite have with getting into a very small set of high prestige Chinese institutions in particular, but I guess not exclusively, Tsinghua and Beida. For the most part, admission to these institutions is regulated through results in the Gaokao, the national examinations. Can you describe these exams for us and how institutions like Capital and Pinnacle prepare students for them?

YC: The Gaokao is an annual high stakes exam that students who want to go to any Chinese universities has to participate in. The Gaokao is usually two days but in certain provinces it's three days. So during those days, students will be tested on six different subjects. All of the students has have to be tested on Chinese, English, and math. Students who want to major in humanities or social sciences subjects then will be tested in history, geography, and political studies. While the students who want to major in other like engineering or natural sciences or even medicine, they would have to take the other three subjects, which are biology, chemistry, and physics. Students will then be ranked according to their scores in this Gaokao and then afterwards they will submit a choice list of the colleges, including the majors that they want to major in. Then it would be a sorting system that is automated. About a month later, they will receive their match, or the automated system generations, in the results in the mail, and then they will know where they're going to.

AU: You also described various ways that students can game the system that get extra credit or extra points through things like the mathematics Olympias. I found some of those passages were quite interesting. They reminded me of the TV show, Kota Factory, which is a very similar situation only in India. Can you tell us a little bit about these workarounds or these sources of extra points?

YC: China, I think, actually wants to move slightly away from the total high stakes exams. They want to recognize student diversity and other ways in, in student selection. So they have this system. It's a really complicated system that changes all the time in which students who participate in these things could gain extra points that counts towards the Gaokao. One of them is the exemplary behavior, meaning if they have a high gpa, they're good students then they could get up to 2010 or 20 points that counts towards the Gaokao. Another is ethnic minority. If they claim to be ethnic minorities and show proof or evidence of that, it's more like an affirmative action that they would also get additional points. another one that most of the students take is the additional tests. So, Tsinghua, Beida, and most other universities in China want to select students who prioritize them. And so these students if they should they choose to do that, they could take an additional test three months before the Gaokao specifically for that type of university. And then if they score high enough in that test, Tsinghua or Beida or the other university will then give them extra points that count towards the Gaokao.

AU: You say there's an implicit four stage hierarchy among students between groups called Xueshen, Xueba, Xuezha, and Zueruo or Study Gods, Studyholics, Underachievers, and Losers. These are really effective terms, by the way. Tell us about those groupings and how students come to be unofficially assigned to one of them students.

YC: Let me just define the four tiers first. Study Gods or Xueshen are the students who don't seem to be studying and they have really high test scores. Below them are Studyholics or the Zueba. They are students who also get very high test scores, but they seem to study all the time or they put a lot of effort into their academic performances. Study Gods and Studyholics together are the high status groups in these in these schools. Moving on to the lower tier, we start with the underachievers or the Zuezha. These students are students who don't have very high test scores, and also they don't seem to be studying hard. At the very bottom of the school hierarchy are the losers, which is what the students call them, the Xueruo, as in they study very hard, but they still don't get high test scores. So this is a hierarchy that is primarily based on test scores above everything else, and secondarily, whether one seems to be studying or not.

AU: I was really interested by the discussion in the book or the distinction that students drew between Studyholics and Study Gods and as you say, it's about effortlessness. I got the impression from reading it that a lot of students sort of put that down to innate ability, right? That the study gods were naturally gifted, therefore they didn't have to study. But it definitely wasn't due to anything like socioeconomic privilege. It's interesting because in the United States increasingly or North America and Europe generally, there's a lot of discourse around socioeconomic privilege and educational outcomes. Why do you think the focus is on innateness in China and not on things like privilege as it is in some other parts of the world?

YC: That's a really good question. I actually think that these students are all very privileged and they know it. But inside such a community when everyone is privileged and they're competing among themselves, they no longer see privilege as that important. And I think by grouping a group of students who come from affluence, who grew up in safe and secure neighborhoods, who really didn't do anything other than focus on their studies, they actually don't really recognize privilege. So, that whole set of discourse becomes off the radar for them. Then they could justify all of their efforts or all of their results by their innate, or so-called innate ability, which actually they even themselves have some difficulty understanding what that means.

AU: The book doesn't just look at the status hierarchy among Chinese universities but students are also navigating kind of a global hierarchy of excellence. Either if they go abroad for undergraduate school, or if they do a first degree locally and then leave for a graduate degree. How do they understand which

global institutions are elite and which are not? How do they make sense of that? What's the epistemology of elite? Is it just rankings or is it something more?

YC: I'm really sad to say that yes, it is primarily rankings and not just any ranking. It has to be US News Rankings.

AU: Really. So not even a domestic ranking like Shanghai or the academic rankings of World Universities. It's really is US News. Huh?

YC: It is really US News. I think it's because most of the students want to go to the US, so they think that US news with the word us at least it might be a more influential thing at least in US domestic schools. So that's the primary thing that they go to, even their parents check it out.

AU: Once students are abroad, do they find it difficult to adjust to different styles of teaching and learning or more broadly, different definitions of merit and criteria for how to get ahead either in academics or the workplace? How does that transition work?

YC: Well, let me begin by saying that the schools actually prepare these students really well for going abroad. These students had no problem adjusting to full English environments because a lot of them had a hundred percent English classroom instructions. But the American or western way of high level engagement in the classrooms were quite shocking to them and some of them were horrified at first. They said that they couldn't really keep up with the pace of conversation flow, not because they couldn't follow intellectually, but that they were too slow to respond. By the time that they felt comfortable speaking up, the conversation had already moved on. So over time, I think most of them reported adjustment strategies such as, first of all, they could speak first no matter what, and then they could guide the conversation flow and have participation. Another type was to complete all the readings so they would be prepared for any type of conversation. That would be more of a studyholic strategy. A lot of people just continue to do what they used to do. They still don't really participate in classroom discussions, but they try to do very well in tests, and they spent a lot of effort in the final projects or papers.

AU: The environment that you describe, I wouldn't say it's cutthroat, but it's very competitive. So status and achievement are at the forefront of everybody's lives all the time. I found it interesting that the words Marxist and Leninist don't appear in the book because in the west, a communist or a socialist approach to education would never count as this kind of competition and the stratification of students that you describe. Why does China tolerate or even encourage this approach? Is it as simple as saying "well, that's just what a Confucian heritage gets you," or is there something more complex than ideological at work here?

YC: The idea that Marxist and Leninist weren't really prevalent in the school was actually surprising to me too. I didn't expect that when I first entered the Chinese high schools but then I was reminded in literature that a lot of scholars disagree over whether China's truly a communist society. Some of them find it to be quite capitalist in many ways. I think nonetheless, that these students are very special group, that they were a groom to become future leaders who would represent China in an international society. Globally, we do live in a capitalist world. And so, at least at that time of the study, which was in 2012 to 2014 these students were heavily encouraged to behave and think in ways that fit with the so-called commonly held international values or capitalist values and actually, I think that their parents think that this type of training would give them the tools to succeed in global competition.

AU: So clearly China's capable of producing large cohorts of extremely capable, disciplined, hardworking young people. That's what these schools are churning out but there are some costs to doing this. Not you know, not financial perhaps, but social and emotional costs, not just to the students, but to their families. You talk a lot about the toll of this on mothers which I thought was pretty interesting. Could you tell us about the costs and why families think this kind of education is worth it?

YC: First of all, the families seem to be discounting the fact that it costs them so much. They don't even talk about the cost. They don't register that there are emotional, social, and financial burdens to training or to grooming their children like that. I think it's because one of the reasons is because these students are so-called the only hope of the entire family. They're the single child and that the parents have no choice but to hope for the best and do everything possible to help this one child succeed. On the other hand, when you mentioned cost, I really do think that they should recognize a lot of this cost. The, the students are incredibly burdened. They are in very high levels of pressure. The parents also don't do very well in the last year of high school just because they need to support their children at all costs. And so I can't really say if this is worth it, but I think at least in my study, the families don't seem to be acknowledging this and they're doing exactly what the parents are doing exactly what the country might want them to do, and the children are also trying to do what the families, their countries, and the teachers are telling them what they should be doing.

AU: You talk about mothers giving up their job for a year or two, so they can always be on hand to help the students or maybe even purchasing an apartment that's closer to the school. Those are really significant costs.

AU: Last question, this clearly took you years to do. As you read this, it's very noticeable how long you followed these students and how much effort it must have taken to keep track of all those loose ends for so long. If you could go back and do this research again, what would you do differently?

YC: I get asked about this a lot, and I think long and hard about it. Looking back, I really feel that I did my best in this project. So, I can't truly imagine a wholly different project. But I would have liked to dive into the school histories a bit more. I would have interviewed the school principals. I would've dived into the school archival data to see how the schools were established and what were the founding like principles were. I think this would have given me a better comparative and historical insight of how elites were groomed to China because this study is about how elites are groomed to China for global competition in the 21st century. But a lot of these schools, especially Pinnacle was established in the 20th century, specifically to make Chinese intellectuals competitive in global society and that was about a hundred years ago. It was a very different time back then. I would've liked to do more comparisons by tracing those school histories, but well, maybe one day I can do it after visiting again.

AU: Yi-Lin Chiang, thanks so much for being with us.

YC: Thank you.

AU: It remains for me to thank the show's excellent producers, Tiffany MacLennan and Sam Pufek, and of course, you, the listener for tuning in. If you have any comments or suggestions for future episodes, please send us a line at podcast@higherstrategy.com. Join me next week for episode eight, when our guest will be Dr. Ethan Schrum, author of the Instrumental University Education in the service of the National Agenda since World War II. Bye for now.