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BOOK REVIEW

Study Gods. How the New Chinese Elite Prepare for Global Competition

Yi-Lin Chiang

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Based on an ethnography and interviews with 28 socioeconomically elite students, their parents, and their teachers in Beijing over a period of 7 years (2012–2019), Yi-Lin Chiang, in the present book, describes four types of students: ‘study gods’ (xueshen), ‘studyholics’ (xueba), ‘underachievers’ (xuezhā), and ‘losers’ (xueruo).

‘Study gods’, the main focus of the book as indicated in the title, is a term used by the students themselves to describe their exceptionally high-performing peers. These students are perceived to be ‘godlike’ because they effortlessly and hence supernaturally excel in school. They do not work too hard, but their test scores are very high (p. 40). The ‘studyholics’ also have high test scores, but they have to work very hard to achieve these results. This explains why they do not have the ‘godlike’ status of the ‘study gods’ (p. 41). ‘Underachievers’, further, neither work hard nor have high test scores (p. 42). ‘Losers’, finally, study hard but still get low test scores (p. 44).

Yi-Lin Chiang’s research importantly finds that the students themselves commonly refer to the ‘innate ability argument’ (study gods are innately superior and losers are innately inferior) to justify this hierarchical order (p. 54). An important ramification of this is that the ‘study gods’ find it self-evident that they occupy the centre of attention when interacting with peers, and that they enjoy teachers’ pampering and parents’ indulgence (p. 4, p. 144). ‘Underachievers’ and ‘losers’, on the other hand, have difficulty obtaining the academic assistance they need – teachers were indeed found rarely to grant favours to below-average students (p. 120).

In reality, however, being a study god (or a studyholic) highly depends on the social background of the student. Study gods (and studyholics) mostly belong to China’s contemporary socioeconomic elite. It is this status that enables their parents to take care of many daily chores and put great effort into helping their children prepare for college. This also includes providing for elaborate consumption, the temporary withdrawal of one of the parents from the labour force, and moving the family’s residence (p. 139). The dark side of these parental practices is that these students are found to come to expect parental sacrifices as natural, which further fosters their strong sense of being an elite. The research also shows that study gods and studyholics continue to expect to be excused for misconduct and to maintain strong feelings of entitlement to various privileges even after high school graduation (p. 98). When entering the labour force, also, this attitude was seen to continue (p. 112).

That the different self-perceptions and dispositions which the high performers and low performers learned in school are later reproduced in job settings (p. 118, p. 127) obviously has an important impact on the continuation of social divisions in Chinese society: it is clear that not all parents possess the ability to do as the elite parents do (p. 182). Moreover, elite parents have mostly gone through the same process themselves. It is their personal experience and deep knowledge of status competition that makes them aware of the importance of study results as a prerequisite to enter a top university, which is, in its turn, key to obtaining elite status. It is also the parents’ own experience that helps them to assist their children when they face a setback in study progress (p. 166). This attitude of both students and their parents is sustained by the finding that “graduates from Peking and Tsinghua, the two top universities in the country, enjoy benefits that alumni from other universities do not. These

include 95 percent employment rates upon college graduation (when policy makers are concerned about the country's overall low college employment rates), starting salaries that are 50 percent higher than the national average for college graduates, and powerful alumni networks in politics, academia, and economics. Given that these benefits carry long-term consequences, elites understandably see obtaining top education credentials as the optimal pathway to passing on their socio-economic positions" (p. 16).

These parents also acknowledge the value of fighting for elite status at the global level. There is indeed an international dimension to the phenomenon of status reproduction. As Yi-Lin Chiang shows in the fourth chapter of the book, in order to assist Chinese elite students in applying for entry into American universities, "schoolteachers provide recommendation letters and determine a student's Grade Point Average (GPA), both of which are part of the application package. Additionally, these students trust their counselors to send them to universities in the United States" (p. 103) - about half of the 28 students on which the present research was based smoothly transitioned to top universities in China, the United States, or the United Kingdom. Chinese elite high schools also use 'school counselors' who build relationships with university admissions officers, are able to establish their high schools as feeders for those universities, and, in this way, play a part in students' college admission outcomes (p. 104). For the teachers, too, it is important that a good number of their students get into top universities, as "it is public knowledge that top high schools give teachers bonuses if their students perform well" (p. 104). In the same way as students deploy the strategies they learned while studying in a labour context, once they have graduated from a top American (or European) university, these young adults are also seen to adopt these strategies to maximise status outcomes as they engage in global competition (p. 67). Having become high earners globally, they "subscribe to an entitlement-and-performance model of social status carried over from high school" (p. 125).

The importance of this study is, among others, that while most research so far on social inequality and status reproduction (as distinct from upward social mobility) has considered these phenomena as restricted to one country, it is now shown that the elite students of China are part of the dynamics of elite status reproduction on a global scale. The elite youths from China are "internationally minded, globally oriented, and overwhelmingly choose to reside outside of China. They go to top universities around the world and hold credentials that have global recognition; their starting incomes put them at the top of Western, developed countries" (p. 186). Socioeconomic elites, therefore, do not only have to be identified as a strong force of social inequality in a particular country, but, together, they contribute to inequality on a global scale. That students who are regarded as study gods or studyholics are believed by their peers to be innately superior obscures the significance of family background (p. 198). This may have an important impact on how these 'elites' conceive of problems of social and economic inequality worldwide. "Using the innate ability explanation to justify an inherently unequal society, students thus fail to see their advantages and positions in the hierarchy as consequences of inequalities [...] if the future socioeconomic elite believe that the poor or less-educated masses are worse off due to innate inferiority, they are unlikely to take issue with increasing inequality around the world. They might also have limited motivation for designing and supporting effective policies for poverty relief,

wealth redistribution, or other reforms aimed at narrowing inequality in general” (p. 199). Also, in a context of growing anti-Asian racism and hostility toward Chinese nationals (p. 192), the perception of an endangered ‘elite status’ among these Chinese youth may have an important impact on their psychological wellbeing which may, in its turn, have undesirable effects.

Yi-Lin Chiang rightfully concludes (pp.201-202) that: “Looking at the example of elite youths from China provides a vocabulary for understanding global society. It highlights the ways in which the elite of today are a cohesive group as well as the unique ways countries prepare their affluent youths for global competition. Such cohesion connects societies in an increasingly intertwined world, where the elite of different upbringings and nationalities are tightly linked in intricate ways. An understanding of status reproduction at the global level is more accurate than examining elite formation as a process that takes place within individual countries”.

With this conclusion in mind, a greater awareness “of the ways and mechanisms through which elite youths reproduce their parents’ high status” might enable societies to acknowledge that, “together, we all contribute to producing one group of what is becoming the new, global elite” (p. 202). This finding is of particular importance in a global context of increasing socio-economic inequality, and with an increasing number of Chinese ‘elite’ students at Western universities.