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The essentialisation of China in 'Critical internationalisation studies': a new orientalism?

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a critical perspective on existing academic literature on the internationalisation of higher education in China. The central argument is that much of this work undermines its own aims to contribute to the 'de-centring' of the West and to redress epistemic injustice. This is because it tends to engage in 're-orientalism' and 'Sino-speak', relying on an essentialist binary of East and West. In doing so, it essentialises and exoticises China through constant reference to the West. The paper also explores how this work mirrors closely official PRC state occidentalism, which is employed to quash dissent and to deny the PRC's own engagement in colonialism in the present day, further undermining social justice-oriented goals. Finally, it highlights epistemic illiberalism as a force which has a profound impact on knowledge production in, and about, China, but is often overlooked in this literature.

KEYWORDS

Internationalization; China; higher education; orientalism

Introduction

This special issue is a response to calls for a more critical perspective on internationalisation 'beyond the Western horizon' (Bamberger, Mulvey, and Fei 2025). Such perspectives often necessitate highlighting problematic practices resulting from power asymmetries between countries within the Global South. Given the extent of contemporary global epistemic inequalities (e.g. Mills 2022) which reflect the historical patterns of uneven knowledge production described in Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism*, critique of internationalisation processes within the Global South raises thorny questions around who creates knowledge about these processes, and for what purpose.

In this paper, I seek to highlight some of the issues with research produced in the past two decades on the internationalisation of China's higher education system. It is important to note that the goal of this paper is not to discount or call into question the value of adopting a critical stance on the impact of Western- or eurocentric processes of higher education internationalisation. Clearly, structures of global knowledge production remain unequal and West-centric, and challenging this is an important task (Walker and Martinez-Vargas 2022; Mills 2022). This makes the precise and careful use

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of theory all the more important. While it is imperative to approach critical studies of Chinese higher education with care and to challenge essentialising, or sensationalist or indeed, orientalist narratives when they arise, there is also a risk inherent in simply providing uncritical affirmations, or maintaining 'semi-silences' in these discussions (Kim 2023, 479) given the real social justice issues associated with them.

The paper builds on previous work which has highlighted the problematic use of a binary of 'West' and 'non-West' in comparative and international education research, and a lack of recognition of China's current position within the global political economy (Vickers 2020; Bamberger and Morris 2024). The core argument is that a similarly essentialising East–West binary dominates the 'critical internationalisation studies' research on China, and that therefore, this ostensibly social justice-focused research undermines the pursuit of social justice due to its 're-orientalism' or reversal of orientalist tropes of the past, its contribution to an oppressive ethno-nationalist political project, and its obscuring of epistemic illiberalism in the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Problematising the East/West binary in research on China

The critique of adherence to rigid dualisms, such as dominant vs. dominated and West vs East, in social-scientific research, is well established: scholars across various disciplines have long challenged these binary frameworks. It has now been over two decades since Teng (2004, 7) urged an examination of colonialism beyond the Western horizon:

> The presumption that colonizers were European and the colonized non-European is deeply entrenched both inside and outside the academy. The very notion of studying "Chinese colonialism" thus seems alien to many … The idea that "imperialism" is essentially a Western phenomenon has also been reinforced by scholars of modern China's "postcoloniality," who have tended to focus on China's historical experiences with Western imperialism while ignoring China's own history as an imperialist power. This is due in no small part to the PRC's ardent denials that the Chinese were ever anything but victims of imperialism; hence official PRC discourse refers to Qing expansionism as "national unification," and talk of "Chinese imperialism" is heresy.

Work across the social sciences has, in a similar vein, problematised dualistic thinking about knowledge and power. Hobson and Sajed (2017), for example, describe a 'eurofetishist' tendency among critical theorists who aim to transcend the eurocentrism of existing theory but actually 'fetishise' Western agency and dismiss non-Western agency. Zhang (2020, 90) describes how the Chinese party-state appropriates this kind of 'anti-Western eurocentrism' to 'eradicate difference' within its own borders. Anand (2012) summarises succinctly the incongruity of those in the West viewing coloniality through a Eurocentric lens, deeming power asymmetries and anti-colonial struggles beyond the West to be less important or relevant to the field than the continued dominance of Western countries within the global political economy, arguing that these scholars echo the orientalists of the past, with 'parochialism and specificity perceiving and representing themselves as universalistic' (70). Both Kim (2016) and Chu (2022) also associate a rigid East/West geo-cultural framework with orientalism, arguing that IR theorists of the 'Chinese School' such as Zhao Tingyang construct an essentialised, self-orientalist caricature of 'Chinese thought' as diametrically opposed to 'Western thought' in their attempt to 'indigenise' theory. This echoes Callahan's (2012a, 2012b) critique of Martin Jacques' book *When China Rules the World*, which seems to adhere to a strict and inevitably essentialising East/West binary that mirrors orientalist projects of the past.

The introduction of these debates to the field of comparative and international education (CIE) has been relatively recent, perhaps indicating a need for more engagement and meaningful dialogue with other disciplines among CIE scholars. Vickers (2020) critiques an increasingly mainstream binary framework of West/non-West in CIE research, pointing out a binary framework of colonial West and victimised non-West essentialises and denies the agency of those in the 'non-West', and thus risks reinforcing the eurocentrism it seeks to dismantle. This point is also echoed by Cowen and Kim (2023) and Jansen, Motala, and Singh (2025, 5), who argue for a rejection of these 'troubling binary perspectives on knowledge and authority' within the CIE literature. Vickers also suggests that the field has tended to overlook China's colonial and hegemonic practices, such as its education policies toward ethnic minority groups. In a similar vein, Vickers and Chen (2024) argue that Western scholarship in the field of CIE, pre-occupied with addressing the epistemic hegemony of the West, is dismissive of the complexities associated with China's education system, and fails to adequately address both the oppressive politics of China's peripheries, and the struggles of Chinese scholars who resist the party-state's control over knowledge production (see also Mulvey and Lee 2025). Bamberger and Morris (2024) also argue that this problem persists in the literature on the internationalisation of higher education specifically. They highlight how a tendency to view the world through reductionist binaries leads to a situation which essentially mirrors the 'anti-Western eurocentrism' common in Chinese state occidentalism (Zhang 2020), to the denial of the agency of actors in the Global South, and to the avoidance of criticality around non-Western colonialisms. The latter point is also raised by Kim (2023, 479), who highlights a concerning 'semi-silence' in how the CIE field discusses China.

This paper builds upon this previous work in several ways, offering a more focused critique of the 'critical internationalisation studies' literature on China. It is centred sharply on the social justice issues that an essentialising binary of 'East' and 'West' reifies. It advances the theoretical conversation in the field of comparative and international education by introducing the concepts of 're-orientalism' and 'Sino-Speak' to argue that the use of essentialising dichotomy of East and West, alongside a discarding of the distinction between tradition and modernity, inevitably leads to a simple reversal of orientalist projects of the past, thus undermining the pursuit of epistemic justice. I also elaborate on the concept of 'state occidentalism' to demonstrate how much of this work further undermines the pursuit of social justice by contributing to an ethno-nationalist political project which is antithetical to this aim. Compounding these issues is the epistemic illiberalism of the PRC, which I argue has been overlooked by scholars concerned with epistemic injustice: moving toward social justice requires acknowledging this as a factor distorting knowledge production, alongside the more well-documented epistemological dominance of the West. Finally, this paper also offers two means of moving empirical work forward: by examining education's role in China's attempts at a 'spatial fix' for problems of capital overaccumulation, and its role in promoting the party-state's cultural-hegemonic worldview.

China-focused internationalisation studies literature

This section outlines how existing empirical and conceptual work frames the internationalisation of China's higher education, focusing particularly on work which falls under

the purview of the 'radical' strand of CIS research (e.g. Stein 2021). Internationalisation here refers both to state-led policies—such as joint ventures, university partnerships, and student mobility initiatives—and to broader transnational academic exchanges, all of which are shaped by geopolitical and ideological considerations. The literature reviewed here is focused on international research collaboration, international student mobility, international branch campuses, English medium of instruction (EMI) education, university partnerships, and on Chinese higher education's contributions to the global public good.

This short review serves to highlight issues with the way simplistic and rigid East/West binaries are applied in empirical and conceptual work, with deleterious effects. I highlight a common trope in this body of research, wherein the internationalisation of Chinese higher education is viewed through a lens of hegemonic West and subaltern China, belying a far more complex reality. These works are examples of what Yao Lin (2024) describes as 'spectacularised postcoloniality', wherein:

> in place of genuinely decolonized representations of academic "peripheries," mere spectacles of postcoloniality are often presented to and celebrated by the "center" … a peculiar problem haunting the worthy project of academic decolonization (Lin 2024, 383)

Lin captures well how 'a transcendence of "Western" vices such as capitalism and colonialism' (2024, 384) are projected onto China, while the various problematic aspects of Chinese modernity are glossed over or even promoted through a 'hijacking' of anti-colonial rhetoric, undermining the laudable goals underpinning the decolonisation of academia.

Some of the literature in the 'radical' CIS subfield which focuses on China typifies the issues outlined in the previous section. While the authors of this work have the worthwhile intention to increase recognition of global inequalities between epistemologies and higher education systems, they tend to frame the Chinese higher education system, and Chinese thought, in an oversimplified manner, rather than seeking to recognise the complexity of China's position within global networks of power. Perhaps these authors aim to counter common and problematic tropes in 'Western' public discourse on China: that it is inherently dysfunctional, 'bad', and a fundamental 'problem' for the West (Brown 2023). But their attempts to do so seemingly reverse this distorting binary, which is unhelpful. It can no longer simply be said that China occupies a peripheral or subordinate position within the global political economy. Tenzin (2022, 83) outlines this position, suggesting that China holds a:

> multi-faceted positioning as a colonial agent, (semi-)colonial victim, recipient of colonialist ideology, overthrower of that ideology and its accompanying world-system, and contender for the "top place" within such a world-system.

Similarly, Li (2019) describes the dual position of China as a hegemon to increasingly large swathes of the Global South, and a 'counter-hegemon' which seeks to challenge the US-led global order: far from being a peripheralised and un-agentic victim of Western neo-colonialism, the PRC is engaged in an 'intra-core' competition with the US-West (Li and Bernal-Meza 2022). As a result of this, Vickers and Chen (2024) argue that the positioning of China as a subaltern in the field of comparative and international education is not tenable.

Yet in work on the internationalisation of higher education in China, this tendency remains strong. In some cases, the PRC or concepts argued to be 'Chinese' in origin are presented as relatively ethical alternatives to a problematic and monolithic 'Western' approach to internationalisation. This work tends to forward a view that either tacitly or explicitly endorses, wholesale, the policies of the party-state. An example is Tian and Liu's (2019, 636) appraisal of the international dimensions of China's higher education:

> higher education in China … contributed to the (global) public/common good in many aspects (e.g. cultivating global citizens and producing advanced research outputs), and embraced responsibility for enhancing human wellbeing and life quality

This positive appraisal of the internationalised facets of China's higher education is shared by Wei Liu (2021, 241) who summarises the goals of outward-oriented internationalisation in China as follows:

> To export the Chinese discourse, voice and cultural understanding in the international community through international student education in China and Chinese language/culture promotion overseas.

These goals are framed, as a means for 'protecting [Chinese] national identity' (240). Liu also positions China as a 'non-Western' periphery, implying that it would not be possible for Chinese internationalisation in say, south-east Asia or Africa to be shaped by unequal power relations, given that all places outside of the West are similarly 'peripheral' in his reading. The reality of increasingly asymmetrical power relations between China and other countries in the Global South (See Kinyondo 2019; Mulvey 2021) would of course represent an important potential avenue for any critical discussion of higher education internationalisation. Similarly, the nationalist framing of internationalisation outlined by Liu is problematic, especially in light of said power asymmetries, yet it is framed in overwhelmingly positive terms by Liu.

In a similar vein to Liu, others tend more strongly towards a framing of internationalisation which draws upon a binary of an active West and an essentialised, passive East, while promoting a mode of internationalisation which is closely tied with a rising tide of ethnic nationalism in China. Xu (2021), for example, suggests that branch campuses are neo-colonial in nature, as they promote the 'Westernisation' of Chinese higher education. He seemingly argues against the very existence of branch campuses in the name of fostering 'cultural confidence' (Xu, 2021, p. 82). Jing, Ghosh, and Liu (2023) also apply this lens to their study of an international branch campus in China, suggesting that their case study provides further evidence of the neo-colonial nature of such campuses. Zha, Wu, and Hayhoe (2019) employ the same framing, drawing on evidence from interviews with staff at Chinese universities to argue that internationalisation is 'framed with a neo/colonial imaginary' and that therefore, the epistemic difference should be 'stressed with confidence' – in order to allow Chinese universities to take a place at the top of the global hierarchy of institutions. It is worth noting that other studies (e.g. Si and Rayner 2025) offer a more sophisticated analysis of the power dynamics at play in these partnerships.

The aim here is not to challenge the argument that branch campuses are a manifestation of global power asymmetries: rather, it is to highlight the binaries employed particularly in the 'radical' strand of CIS scholarship. These papers also unambiguously

evince the discourse of 'cultural confidence', closely tied to Xi Jinping's project of ethnic/cultural nationalism (Lin 2024). Discussions focused on other contexts tend to highlight the potentially negative impact of nationalism on processes of internationalisation (Li 2021; Marginson 2024), whereas these authors appear to make a normative case for tying together of internationalisation and state ethno-nationalist projects, thereby co-opting the anti-colonial in defence of state power and nationalism (Lin 2024; Zhang 2020).

A similar theme is present in studies focused on English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in Chinese universities. Guo et al. (2022) draw directly on the 'critical internationalisation studies' literature to make an argument that an 'Englishization equals internationalization ideology' in China leads to the promotion of 'the superiority of Western culture' and the 'devaluation of Chinese knowledge' (449). Song (2021), focusing on English medium of instruction programmes in China, argues that EMI curriculums construct an 'implicit hegemonic hierarchy' (342) among students based on their English skills, again presenting a dichotomy of hegemonic West and China as a victim of unequal power relations in global knowledge production. In a more recent article, Song (2023) discusses an EMI philosophy course at a Chinese university, arguing that promoting Chinese philosophy through such courses represents a means of decolonising philosophy. Song rightly highlights the potential of student mobility to destinations beyond the Western horizon to promote epistemic plurality, but does not acknowledge the situation with regard to epistemic plurality within China's borders. But this appears to be somewhat of an oversimplification resulting from the employment of a rigid binary: Chinese philosophy, in Song's interpretation, seems to effectively mean Han Chinese philosophy, and the well-documented enforcement of epistemic monism and associated attempts at the erasure of minority cultures and knowledges within China's the PRC's borders (e.g. Tibetan, Uyghur, Mongolian) (e.g. Anand 2012; Bulag 2024; Tobin 2024; Topgyal 2013; Tynen 2022) is not acknowledged. In this argument for epistemic pluralism through a focus on 'Chinese' philosophy, Song thus actually reinforces this state-enforced epistemic homogeneity: the totalising vision of 'Chineseness' enforced by the Party-state in China (Yan and Vickers 2019, 2024) means that the philosophical canons of minority cultures are unlikely to be given equal status to philosophy associated with the dominant Han group in such courses.

Conceptual work tends to adopt a similar stance. Yang (2023) seeks to compare notions of the public good in 'Anglo-American' and Chinese higher education, arguing that Anglo-American approaches to global higher education 'underrecognise higher education's contributions to the global public good', juxtaposing this with a 'Chinese approach' which is 'more comfortable with higher education's social and cultural goods in addition to economic goods' (250). Work on the concept of *Tianxia* (天下) in higher education tends to adopt a similar framing. Yang and colleagues (e.g. Yang 2022; Yang and Tian 2022; Yang, Marginson, and Xu 2024) adopt Zhao Tingyang's (e.g. Tingyang 2009) conception of *Tianxia* arguing that this represents a means for developing a new vision of internationalised higher education which is more inclusive and concerned with the global collective good, as opposed to Western or Anglo-American understandings, wherein 'national and local parochial goods' take precedence (Yang and Tian 2022, 548). The central aim of this work is to explore how China's indigenous thought traditions and concepts can be employed to construct discourses of global higher education (Yang 2022).

There is however, a limited, emergent body of literature which does seek to move beyond this essentialised depiction of Chinese higher education and China's relationship with other parts of the world: these studies bring into focus the key issues with regard to the internationalisation of China's higher education system that has largely been neglected in the existing literature. As well as the work of Vickers, Chen, Bamberger and Morris outlined above, work on China as a study destination for international students has also begun to highlight how power asymmetries manifest in both the discourses surrounding internationalisation and the experiences of students from the Global South in China (Agyenim-Boateng 2022; Mulvey 2023; Robertson and Wu 2023). Mulvey (2023), for example, highlights how power asymmetries play out in student mobilities between China and Africa, highlighting issues such as the racialised reception of African international students in China, and the use of forms of China–Africa cooperation by the Chinese state to augment its 'discursive power'. Robertson and Wu (2023) describe how education projects associated with the BRI assert the 'superiority and universality of Chinese civilisation', thus raising the prospect of a 'political and cultural imperialism in the making' (10). This emergent literature calls into question the essentialising visions of Chinese higher education in the existing literature.

The purpose of this brief and inevitably somewhat selective review of the China-focused 'critical internationalisation studies' literature is to highlight a central issue with the foundations of this field: That the binary of West and 'other', or 'dominant' and 'dominated' that is so central to most of these analyses can encourage an essentialist and one-dimensional view of processes of internationalisation. In the following sections, I expand upon this problematisation.

Critical internationalisation studies: preventing a 'three-dimensional' perspective on non-Western societies?

(Re)-Orientalism

These accounts of Chinese higher education and the nature of its integration into the global higher education may seem unproblematic to the majority of readers who may be unfamiliar with non-Western contexts and thus not cognisant of their complexities. The lack of familiarity with non-Western contexts that causes the unquestioning acceptance of these discourses is, ironically, symptomatic of the very West-centrism that many in the field seek to challenge and overturn. Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992) captures the irony of this predicament wherein the application of a 'grand theory' in a 'West-centric' field reinforces the epistemic inequalities that, in this case, it is aimed at challenging:

> For generations now, philosophers and thinkers who shape the nature of social science have produced grand theories that embrace the entirety of humanity. As we well know, these statements have been produced in relative, and sometimes absolute, ignorance of the majority of humankind – that is, those living in non-Western cultures. (Chakrabarty 1992, 29)

A genuine turn away from such West-centrism thus requires viewing China in particular, but also other non-Western countries as three-dimensional actors, rather than one-dimensional, passive, subjects of processes dominated by the hegemonic anglophone West (Hobson and Sajed 2017). This in turn requires researchers to take more seriously

their duty to explore non-Western agency by acknowledging power relations both between the West and non-West, and beyond the Western horizon. In this section, I expand upon the issues which the 'East vs. West' binary creates in the China-focused internationalisation literature, before moving on to a discussion, based on this analysis, of how knowledge production about China within CIE can move beyond the warping caused by 're-orientalism' on the one hand, and authoritarianism on the other.

A key problem with the critical internationalisation studies literature outlined in the previous section is that it actually reproduces and reinforces many of the social justice issues that it seeks to remedy. In general, it tends to centre the 'West' in discussions of China. Much of this literature, and in particular, conceptual work, appears to engage in 're-orientalism', or 'Sino-speak' (Callahan 2012a, 2012b; Lau and Mendes 2012). This again demonstrates how 'critical internationalisation' literature actually undermines the goal of 'de-centring' the West. Re-orientalism is often closely related to the promotion of epistemic plurality, but attempts at doing so often result in a reinforcing of orientalist tropes. The concept emphasises the role of a binary between 'West' and 'East' in reproducing and reinforcing some of the tropes associated with orientalism. Lau and Mendes (2012) outline a process of self-othering, wherein knowledge producers within the 'Orient' continue to 'reference the West as the centre and place themselves as the "Other"' (3). In the case of China, this involves attempting to promote China and redress perceived misunderstandings, relying on comprehensible accounts which ultimately constitute particularised promotions of certain aspects of China (usually related to 'tradition') relying on the use of orientalist tropes and eschewing more holistic representations.

Work on the concept of *Tianxia* represents an archetypal example of re-orientalism (e.g. Yang 2023; Marginson and Yang 2022). Before addressing the re-orientalisation of China present in this work, it seems necessary to note that the most obvious criticism of *Tianxia* as conceived by these authors is the disconnect between the concept and realities on the ground in the PRC: education policy within the PRC's borders appears to directly oppose the core tenets of inclusiveness and cosmopolitanism that they associate with the *Tianxia* ethos (e.g. Bulag 2024; Yan and Vickers 2019, 2024). Relatedly, Yang and colleagues also readily adopt Zhao's Tingyang's (2009) conceptualisation without problematising its assimilationist and implicitly racist underpinnings: Bulag (2024) describes Zhao's work on *Tianxia* as a 'nationalist theology' (107), which attributes the assimilation of minority groups in China to a voluntary 'self-sacrifice' attributable the attraction of the 'superior' Han culture. These authors' intentions are evidently to lessen epistemic injustice: it thus seems important to address this critique, particularly as they are presenting Zhao's work to an audience that may be unfamiliar with these debates. Work on the concept of *Tianxia* could therefore be strengthened by directly acknowledging the evident and substantial gap between 'ideal' and reality.

However, these inconvenient realities perhaps explain the de-emphasising of China's modernity, and the focus on developing a concept based on an idealised Chinese 'tradition', while avoiding discussions of injustices brought about by contemporary education policies in the PRC. Yet the risk of a focus on tradition at the expense of modernity is that scholarship slips into a contemporary rehashing of the orientalist tropes of the past. These authors have the explicit goal of bringing Chinese theory to the fore in the context of Western epistemic hegemony (Marginson and Yang 2022; Yang and Tian 2022). Thus, as with the 'Re-orientalism' in other contexts, here, an East/

West dichotomy must be established, and this facet of 'Chineseness' positioned as 'Other' to 'Anglo-America', because China is being positioned as offering something different (and superior) which can address the failings of Western (or Anglo-American) modernity (Schmidt 2013). However, in setting up this framework, the authors inevitably reinforce orientalist tropes: 'indigenously Chinese' concepts are developed with reference to the West (or 'Anglo-America'). Thus, literature promoting the concept of *Tianxia* in higher education studies engages in a similar variety of 'Sino-speak' to 'Orientalist-in-Chief' Martin Jacques, while also drawing at times on Jacques' book *When China Rules the World* (e.g. Marginson and Yang 2022; Yang 2023). Callahan (2012a, 37) describes how Jacques 'imposes a strict East/West geo-cultural framework that is reminiscent of orientalist projects of the past, except in reverse', while also discarding another grand dichotomy, by drawing a direct line between 'tradition' and modernity, constructing an essentialised and eternal China: a hallmark of conventional orientalism (Said, 1978). In the body of work on *Tianxia*, a similar essentialist 'East/West' dichotomy is set up, while the 'tradition/modernity' dichotomy is discarded: the PRC is essentialised as fundamentally and irreconcilably 'different' to 'Anglo-America', echoing Jacques' orientalist position.

Another problem lies in the nature of this comparison. An unsentimental and matter-of-fact conceptualisation and assessment of Anglo-American internationalisation is juxtaposed with a romanticised conceptualisation of Chinese understandings of internationalisation which are underpinned by reference to a concept with its roots in imperial China, and with minimal allusion to the more nuanced realities of processes of internationalisation (Bamberger and Morris 2024). It appears then, that in attempting to promote epistemic pluralism, these authors actually render Chinese culture a 'spectacle of otherness' (Schmidt 2013, 651). Schmidt's (2013) exploration of the workings of Re-orientalism in Confucius Institutes captures this process well:

> It is not so much about the extraction of cultural raw materials from exotic locations for consumption in Western metropoles … as it is about an intentional exportation from China to locations around the globe. In this purposeful exportation from China, there are competing agendas. The desire to show China as it is today – to dispel misunderstandings and stereotypes of China as political other – gets bound up with the realization that orientalism, as a branding tool, sells. (Schmidt 2013, 659)

In other words, an attempt 'indigenise' representations of China by developing an ostensibly 'Chinese' concept, effectively also as a 'branding tool', serves to further essentialise and exoticise China through constant reference to the West.

The myriad ethical and theoretical issues with the concept of *Tianxia*, not addressed in work employing this concept in the critical internationalisation studies literature, are highlighted by Kim (2016), who further emphasises the problem with the romanticisation of such concepts. With regard to *Tianxia*, he highlights the importance of one's position relative to power structures. When viewed from the periphery of the Chinese empire, many of the seemingly positive attributes, such as the 'virtues, values, and norms', as well as 'diversity and harmony' highlighted by Yang and Tian (2022), which enable Chinese cultural leadership, are in fact 'myths': in reality, cultural leadership and apparent 'harmony' were the results of structural power, and in many cases, violence (2016, 75). This is another reason to have reservations about the *Tianxia*

framework's purported contribution to epistemic justice, and one which may be overlooked if the theory is viewed through a West/East binary, belying the complexity of power structures beyond the West.

In sum, a central issue with the critical internationalisation studies literature that is focused on China is that it exacerbates many of the problems it ostensibly seeks to remedy, due in part to the adoption of a perspective which seems unable to capture the nuances of China's position within the global political economy.

Occidentalism and the nationalist turn

The essentialisation of China in relation to the West, as well as serving a purpose as an analytical shortcut, also has a political function. The literature reviewed here often closely follows official PRC state-backed occidentalism (Bamberger and Morris 2024). 'official' occidentalism is essentially orientalism in reverse:

> China asserts authority over itself and the West by first rejecting the West, and then searching for Chinese values in a negative quest. (Callahan 2015, 157)

A prime example of this state-occidentalist discourse is Zhao Tingyang's juxtaposition of a conflict-free and virtuous China with a chaotic and malign West in his work on the concept of *Tianxia*, drawn on extensively by Yang and colleagues (e.g. Yang and Tian 2022; Yang, Marginson, and Xu 2024). The workings of official Occidentalism are clear in the dualism set up by Zhao and reproduced by Yang: everything positive and desirable (e.g. harmony, order) is found within the 'traditional' Chinese system, and everything malign (e.g. anarchy, disorder) is found within the West (Kim 2016, 74). Yan Xuetong, who like Zhao is a distinguished professor and theorist in the 'Chinese school' of international relations, has cautioned against this perspective. He suggests that a worldview of 'China vs foreign countries', in which 'all good values are Chinese, and all bad ones are foreign', has become part of mainstream public discourse in the PRC, to the extent that many views 'the West' as a synonym for 'evil': hardly a view commensurate with the inter-cultural understanding and dialogue that the authors drawing on Zhao's work in the field of CIE seemingly advocate (Tsinghua University 2022). In overlooking the occidentalism in Zhao's work, and thus reinforcing the trends that Yan warns of, these authors contribute to an ethno-nationalist political project (see Zhang 2020) which is harmful to the goals that one would normally associate with both internationalisation and social justice.

In addition to stoking Han ethno-nationalism, the purpose of official Occidentalism in China is related to regime legitimation and the stifling of dissent. As Chen Xiaomei (2002) puts it:

> it seems clear that the primary aim of the Chinese discourse [of official Occidentalism] has been domestic oppression of political opponents rather than world domination, while the inverse has been true in the West. (Chen 2002, 7)

Today, the party-state's use of official occidentalism is broader in scope: oppression of political opponents transcends national borders, and occidentalist discourse is employed in the service of China's pursuit of intra-imperial competition with the US. Chen (2002) distinguishes between this official Occidentalism, and a counter-discourse of 'anti-official'

occidentalism, which glorifies and sanitises the West as a means of resisting the authoritarian political regime in China. This further brings into focus how conversations within the field of comparative and international education sometimes obscure the complexity of the China-West relationship: to some in China, authoritarianism and internal colonialism are immediate and pressing issues, but this is scarcely reflected in existing literature (Bulag 2024; Leibold and Dorjee 2024; Vickers and Chen 2024).

The mirroring of official occidentalist discourses in work on internationalisation in China is also problematic in the sense that it reinforces the narrative which is employed by the Chinese party-state to justify its own colonialism. The framing of China as peripheralised also aligns closely with party-state discourse: Anand (2019) describes how the party-state appeals to the sympathies of those critical of Western hegemony by arguing that any criticisms of Chinese colonialism emanating from outside of the PRC are simply Western imperialist attempts at undermining the Chinese nationalist project. Shifts in the PRC's position within the global political economy, along with the party-state's self-positioning as a peripheral victim of Western neo-colonialism, mean that it is necessary to acknowledge these complexities when examining processes of internationalisation in Chinese higher education. However, these complexities are not reflected in the literature.

More recent manifestations of this official occidentalism are also associated with a nationalist turn in the PRC. There has been much discussion of worrying populist and nationalist turns impacting processes of higher education internationalisation globally (e.g. Li 2021; Marginson 2024). These discussions tend to focus on the West and particularly the US. In a sense, this stands to reason, given its hegemonic position in the field of global higher education, and the authors raise important points around the targeting of ethnic Chinese researchers in the USA, and the dangers of securitisation for cooperation in global science systems, particularly in light of the re-election of Donald Trump's far-right Republican Party. But these discussions tend to overlook a concurrent and equally as worrying shift in China further towards nationalism (Cheng 2019; Nathan and Zhang 2022), again a result of the 'spectacularised postcoloniality' of the authors. Both Marginson (2024) and Li (2021), for instance, rightly problematise the US governments' role in limiting cooperation between Chinese and American universities, but choose not to discuss the isolationist/nationalist turn in both countries, a product, at least in part, of 'intra-core' rivalry.

Since the ascension of Xi Jinping in 2012, the PRC has turned further towards an isolationist form of ethnic nationalism, and associated with this, the party-state has engineered a shift towards the securitisation of Chinese society (Lin 2024; Ming 2023). This also impacts higher education. For example, it is increasingly difficult for foreign academics to conduct research in China (Greitens and Truex 2019), and foreign access to research databases has been restricted (University World News 2023). In addition, in some PRC institutions, any meeting with a 'foreigner' now requires prior approval and the submission of a report afterwards, and in these institutions, the same foreign person cannot be met twice within the space of one year (Jia 2024). Some academics also need approval to attend online seminars or international conferences, which is not always granted (Truex 2024). Thus, it is perplexing that discussions of the nationalist turn in higher education globally have tended to omit any mention of these shifts happening within the PRC.

Looking beyond the US–China binary, towards rising nationalisms elsewhere, also highlights an unevenness in the way that the relationship between ethno-nationalisms and internationalisation is framed between research in Western contexts and in China. Brøgger (2023) focuses on the implications of emergent 'neo-nationalisms' across Europe for higher education, citing recent initiatives to reduce the number of English-language university programmes in Denmark, and emphasising how ethno-nationalism is in some cases a threat to processes of internationalisation. Despite a concurrent swelling of ethno-nationalism in China, research on China's internationalisation seems to either ignore such ethno-nationalism completely, or, in many cases, to seemingly frame the promotion of ethno-nationalist goals through internationalisation in wholly positive terms. However, highlighting the shift towards a more extreme form of ethno-nationalism, and the securitisation that comes with this, is more politically difficult for China-based researchers to address than it is for their European counterparts, due to the way that the Chinese state seeks to shape knowledge production in and about China (Perry 2020; Vickers and Epstein 2024; Zhang 2020).

Epistemic Illiberalism

The examples in the preceding section underscore that knowledge production about and within the PRC is shaped by multiple, often competing forces. On the one hand, it has long been marked by a Eurocentrism, wherein other ways of knowing are marginalised—an issue rightly brought to the fore by many of the works reviewed here. However, the attempt to redress this marginalisation within the field of comparative and international education has also led to a reproduction of official PRC state occidentalism through an emphasis on the interplay between Western imperialism on the one hand, and (and in many cases re-orientalised) China on the other. This tendency effectively serves to augment a second force impacting discussions in and about the PRC: epistemic illiberalism. Lin highlights how this: 'induces pervasive and systematic malformations of knowledge and theory, both within and outside academia' (Lin 2024, 378). He offers a useful heuristic for understanding how epistemic illiberalism operates on three levels. First, the institutional: the institutions within Chinese academia—such as Party Committees, grant-awarding bodies, and so on—are employed to warp the selection of topics for research, contributing to a broader skewing of knowledge production. Second, the informational: scholars are unable to access materials that are censored from databases or websites that are blocked, influencing the development of research topics and perspectives. Third, the 'incorporational', wherein 'through various conscious or unconscious psychological processes' (Lin 2024, 381), scholars incorporate the norms and heuristics of the regime, which then influence research outputs. The body of literature reviewed for this paper is an example of this distorted knowledge production as a result of epistemic illiberalism, insofar as it neglects important but 'politically sensitive' topics such as contemporary colonialism in the PRC, and reproduces the party-state's narratives of Chinese cultural superiority. There is a danger in, as a result of an adherence to a strong form of prescriptive cultural relativism, seeing the outcomes of epistemic illiberalism as a natural result of Chinese cultural tradition, thus lending support to authoritarian regimes that seek to stifle and control knowledge production (Mulvey and Lee 2025).

Thus, discussions of knowledge production in and about the PRC must take all of these forces into account, rather than focusing only redressing Western epistemological dominance as one force which distorts knowledge production. Often, discussions around Chinese higher education seem to gloss over or seek to minimise the role of modern[1] authoritarianism in contemporary knowledge production in and about the PRC (e.g. Song 2021; 2023; Yang 2023; Yang and Tian 2022). These works tend to rightly emphasise Western epistemological dominance, but to neglect the Chinese state's illiberalism as a factor impacting knowledge production. This highlights the central issue with regard to knowledge production: often, non-Western actors are simply lumped together as uniformly subaltern. Owen (2020) highlights the problem with this line of thinking:

> In the case of China, this would mean, presumably, that to decolonise transnational research partnerships, the CCP should be seen as a legitimate locus of enunciation. The fact that the CCP may subsequently seek to establish a hegemonic discourse and close down alternative narratives is not considered. (Owen 2020, 250)

In other words, existing work on Chinese higher education which frames Chinese higher education as subaltern does not offer a means of accounting for the impact of epistemic illiberalism of the PRC's government on global knowledge production and epistemic pluralism: rather, it positions the PRC as a 'legitimate epistemic actor' (Owen 2020, 251). Much of the literature on the internationalisation of Chinese higher education which falls into the purview of 'radical CIS' aligns itself, through the reproduction of occidentalist tropes, with an actor which seeks to warp knowledge production about the PRC.

Towards a more nuanced understanding of internationalising Chinese higher education

The West-centredness of the field of CIE, as exemplified in the preceding sections, leads to a general ignorance of the complexities faced in the rest of the world, undermining the goal of dislodging the West as the central subject of empirical and conceptual work focused on the Global South.

In a response to Vickers (2020) essay which raised the issue of 'West vs. Rest' dualisms and 'euro-fetishism' (Hobson and Sajed 2017) in the field of CIE, Stein et al. (2020, 2) argue that addressing epistemic injustice 'may require the strategic mobilizations of generalizations about Western knowledge as well'. But this is seemingly a defence of eurocentrism (or 'euro-fetishism') problematised by many (e.g. Anand 2012; Chu 2022; Kim 2016; Vickers 2020; Zhang 2020), without a full acknowledgement or engagement with the arguments made by these authors around the potentially pernicious and counterproductive effects of such strategic mobilisations of binaries.

Given the changing nature of both the global political economy, and CIE, it seems necessary to seriously consider how power asymmetries manifest in the non-West, even if it is not necessarily beholden on scholars whose work focuses on 'Western' contexts to do this work. China's position within the global political economy is more complex than much of the CIS literature tends to acknowledge. A more comprehensive view of the internationalisation of Chinese higher education, as agentic and three-dimensional, rather than essentialised and passive does require problematisation.

There are two main approaches to understanding global power structures which could be useful in the pursuit of this end, between which there tends to be a limited amount of

dialogue. The goal of introducing these critical perspectives is not to vilify or 'demonise' the Chinese state and its foreign policy. Rather it is to put forward two means through which China's 'outward-oriented' internationalisation could be subjected to a similar level of scrutiny as other actors, in a context where such scrutiny is discouraged by the party-state. The first focuses on global maldistribution, or in other words, on the dynamics of global capital (e.g. Harvey 2005). This approach is less common in education studies. The second focuses on issues of cultural recognition, the approach most common in CIS (e.g. Stein et al. 2016).

A focus on global circuits of capital is useful in understanding the complexities associated with the internationalisation of Chinese higher education. Harvey (2005) uses the term 'spatial fix' to describe the geography of capitalist accumulation. This refers to the tendency for capitalism to seek a resolution to tendencies towards internal crisis through spatial expansion. More recently, others have employed this concept as an explanatory mechanism for China's 'going out' strategies, most notably the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) (Taylor and Zajontz 2020; Zajontz 2023; Zhang 2017). This approach to understanding China's economic engagement with its peripheries leads to a more sophisticated analysis than those characterised by either blind praise or prejudice. These authors see the BRI primarily as an attempt to solve problems with the PRC's capital and material overaccumulation through geographical expansion. The infrastructural component of this 'fix' represents a means of reducing spatial barriers between markets and providing an indirect form of subsidy for Chinese enterprises (especially state-owned enterprises) 'suffering financially from industrial oversupply' (Ehizuelen and Abdi 2018, 290).

The internationalisation of Chinese higher education has become increasingly intertwined with the BRI, described as the 'soft infrastructure' which complements the 'hard infrastructure' projects at the core of the initiative (Cheng and Koh 2022; Peters 2020). Chinese universities have been employed to further the BRI through targeted recruitment of international students from these countries, mutual degree recognition, collaborative laboratories, Chinese overseas branch campuses (e.g. Suzhou University Laos, Xiamen University Malaysia), and research institutes in BRI countries (PRC MoE 2019). Existing studies have tended to take at face value the PRC's outward facing publicity material on the role of higher education in the BRI (e.g. Cheng and Koh 2022; Ge and Ho 2022). But given the clear parallels between the PRC's spatial fix and earlier patterns of unequal North–South exchange, subjecting the PRC's case to the same level of scrutiny as systems in the Global North represents a means of moving understandings forward.

Questions remain surrounding the outcomes of Chinese investments along the BRI (e.g. Alden 2020; Kinyondo 2019) which cannot be straightforwardly explained away as 'Western' attempts to undermine it. The manifestations of unequal social dynamics in 'hard infrastructure projects', for example, violence against and unequal treatment of African workers on large projects such as the Kenyan standard gauge railway, are well documented (Tarrósy 2019). Yet research on China's higher education internationalisation as a facet of the 'soft infrastructure' of the BRI has not asked the same questions around power asymmetries and their manifestations. This represents one potential avenue for further investigation.

A more nuanced approach to the internationalisation of China's higher education could also foreground issues of cultural recognition and epistemic inequalities. This involves moving beyond simply reproducing the Chinese state discourse of 'mutual

benefit' and 'win-win cooperation' (e.g. King 2013). The role of international students in augmenting China's soft power (e.g. Mulvey 2023) is important here. Robertson and Wu (2023) highlight the role of internationalised Chinese higher education in 'telling China's story well', which they argue effectively means propagating 'China's empire discourse' (9). They subsequently argue that this means utilising students to promote: 'a cultural-hegemonic worldview that buttress the legitimacy of the CCP, and facilitates the expansion of its global geopolitical ambitions.' (10). Beyond this, there is very little existing research on how transnational repression is influencing the internationalisation of Chinese higher education, and in particular the outbound mobility of students from the country (Bamberger, forthcoming). A recent Human Rights Watch report details how Chinese students often fear retribution from the state against themselves or their families, and as a result often self-censor in class or in academic work (HRW 2021). Han and Tong (2021) highlight how Chinese Students and Scholars Associations in universities outside of China serve the purpose of surveilling Chinese students while they are overseas. Better understandings of the Chinese state's mechanisms for and practices of transnational repression as it relates to internationalised higher education are crucial, but research on this topic is difficult, due to its 'political sensitivity'.

These examples demonstrate how viewing the internationalisation of Chinese higher education in light of China's recent shift towards the centre of the global political economy and its inter-imperial rivalry with the US represents a direction for future research (Li 2019). This has the potential to generate a useful and more comprehensive understanding of the way that internationalisation is shaped by the broader networks of power within which these processes take place. In sum, while it is crucial to approach critical studies of China with care, challenging orientalist or sensationalist tropes when they arise, there is a risk that such efforts, if not handled with care, may merely invert the problem rather than resolve it. We must therefore resist the temptation to counter sometimes uncharitable critiques in the public domain (Brown 2023) with undue charitableness and uncritical affirmations, as this risks obscuring the complexities and challenges inherent in China's rise to global prominence.

Conclusion: a way forward for CIS?

This article has highlighted a number of fundamental issues with the way that research on a topic of global importance—the internationalisation of the world's largest higher education system—is conducted. It highlights four key issues with this body of work: 'spectacularised postcoloniality'; Re-orientalism; an echoing of 'official occidentalism'; and a bolstering of epistemic illiberalism, which leads to a malforming of knowledge production.

All of this serves to highlight a quandary: How can a sustained addressing of the epistemic dominance of the Anglophone West within global higher education sit alongside a similar addressing of the epistemic illiberalism of the PRC? My suggestion is to consider how existing theory can be adapted and applied in a way that is more sensitive to context, rather than being indiscriminately transposed onto particular contexts and topics as a rigid explanatory framework. Both the re-orientalism and official occidentalism common in the existing literature result from the employment of an East/West geo-cultural framework. In the case of China, truly 'de-centring' research on the internationalisation of the world's largest higher education system means

shifting away from a focus on this binary, and from the essentialised and reductionist characterisation of an eternal China that is typical of much of this work. This means being more reflective around issues of epistemic inequality within China, and how these may be reproduced globally through processes of internationalisation (see Bulag 2024; Vickers and Chen 2024). This necessitates acknowledging China's experiences of (neo-)colonialism, while also exploring how China's more recent role as an emergent superpower impacts the global periphery. Anand (2019) terms this an 'ethic of subversion': that is, subverting the dominant narrative (in the PRC and in the CIS subfield) that China is a victim of power asymmetries, but does not benefit from them in the present day.

However, this subversion of the dominant narrative is difficult due to the fact that both an image of China as subaltern, and an essentialised, romanticised depiction of Chinese thought have been employed fruitfully by the Chinese government in pursuit of their own ethno-nationalist project. Therefore, challenging this narrative requires somehow overcoming not just a system of institutional incentives (e.g. grant awards, Party committees) in China which discourages the subversion of these tools of the state, but also informational barriers which may prevent scholars based in China from developing such an agenda, and the long-term inculcation of the above heuristics into Chinese and increasingly global academic discourse by the party-state.

Ultimately, there is an important role for scholars based outside of China. First, there is a need to more seriously consider the potential problems that adherence to a strong form of prescriptive cultural relativism—increasingly orthodox in the field of CIE—creates in relation to knowledge production about authoritarian states. Relatedly, there is an urgent need to provide platforms to researchers willing to adopt a truly analytic and probing stance on, for example, the role of the internationalisation of China's higher education in China's grand strategy for engagement in the Global South (Robertson and Wu 2023); the surveillance of Chinese students abroad (e.g. Han and Tong 2021); the role of the PRC in the 're-shaping of ethno-racial power constellations' and the implications of this for the international students it hosts (Ang, Ho, and Yeoh 2022, 588); or the role of the PRC state's authoritarianism (as well as Western hegemony) in shaping internationalisation (e.g. Van Der Wende and Zhu 2016). Within the field of CIE, an emphasis on this rigid East/West geo-cultural framework may inadvertently reinforce state-aligned narratives and re-orientalist discourse while limiting the visibility of alternative perspectives, including those of scholars who seek to undertake work on crucially important topics deemed to be 'politically sensitive' by the party-state. Other scholars both within and beyond the field of CIE have highlighted the systemic nature of this marginalisation of critical scholars (Perry 2020; Vickers and Epstein 2024; Zhang 2020). Ensuring inclusivity means providing a platform for those whose perspectives are marginalised, rather than reinforcing the perspectives that contribute to their marginalisation.

Note

1. Some (e.g. Marginson 2014; Zha and Shen 2018) seek to draw a direct line between imperial China and contemporary norms of academic freedom in the PRC. But I use the term modern authoritarianism to avoid this reading (or explaining away) of contemporary issues into 'tradition', and to emphasise the relative power of the *modern* authoritarian state to surveil, censor and punish academics.

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