

## **Hybridisation and Recombination:**

### ***Perspectives on Higher Education in Chinese Societies***

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#### **Perspectives from Chinese societies**

This special issue concerns itself with the complex issues about the integration between the seemingly contradictory Chinese and Western ideas of a university in five Chinese societies—Chinese mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao and Singapore (plus Chinese communities in Southeast Asia). Our concern is not only with how higher education sectors are governed during the contemporary period but also the influence of the past on the present governance of higher education in these Chinese societies.

Our choice of the Chinese societies is based on both the shared cultural roots and their different paths of social and scholarly developments built on the shared wealth of cultural heritage. Facilitated by the potential of Chinese indigenous knowledge, they are all well positioned to overcome Euro/West-centrism and to counteract the tendency towards homogeneity and standardisation in higher education development. Indeed, against the historical background of European imperialism and colonialism, the West came to the Chinese societies with an immense prestige. The theory of academic dependency also adequately explains the situations of these societies. Given that the Chinese societies have undergone different social, economic and political changes and share a common cultural heritage, pursuing an empirically based comparative study between them becomes particularly meaningful.

Chinese societies (*huaren shehui*) here refer to the ones that have significant ethnic, cultural and political connections with China (*zhongguo*). As indicated in the literature, two types of existing narratives interpret China as a cultural entity and a nation-state, respectively; additionally, the intertwining and evolution of these cultural and national narratives are exemplified by the centre–periphery relations between the central state and local institutions (Cohen, 1991; Tu, 1991; Jacques, 2012; Ge, 2014; Wang, 2014). This understanding of China forms a centre–periphery structure in which the selected societies can be put in order of Chineseness (*huaren xing*). In such a centre–periphery framework, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao are seen as ‘Lesser China’ where the traditions of Chinese civilisation are variously inherited and adapted on the broader picture of cultural China, despite the existence of strong but complex political ties between these societies and Chinese mainland (Wang, 1993; Lo, 2016). Similarly, despite its significant ethnic and cultural link with China, Singapore’s status as an independent and sovereign state prompts its ruling regime to manage the Chineseness in its process of nation and identity building (Wong, 2005; Lee, 2017).<sup>1</sup>

From a historical perspective, Chineseness can be revealed by patterns and sequences of thought that constitute strong loyalty towards Chinese traditional cultural values and ideals (Wang, 2009). By contrast, the contemporary use of Chineseness also refers to an awareness of and admiration for the rise of China shared by its neighbouring societies (Shiraishi, 2012). Assuming the presence of West-centred global hegemony, recent research suggests that such use of Chineseness and the associated discursive constructions of regions (e.g. Asia, East Asia and Greater China) present an emergence of a dual hegemonic framework of global political economy, which is perceived as symbolic of the rising challenge to Western dominance (Lee, 2017) and has

subsequently influenced different socio-political activities and institutions, including higher education.

Recent scholarly concerns over the implications of China's Belt and Road initiative and the growing rivalry between China and the US for higher education illustrate how the emergence of dual hegemony may have influenced international higher education (e.g. Kirby & van der Wende, 2019; Cai, 2019; van der Wende, 2019). Marginson (2019) further notes that the rivalry between China and the US comprises foundational differences in social configurations as well as different ideologies of the roles and functions of higher education. This emerging dual hegemonic global landscape provides a novel context for revisiting the discussion on the Western impacts on higher education development in Chinese societies (cf. Altbach, 1989; Hayhoe, 1989; Wu et al., 1989).

### **Cross-cutting approach**

These contextual backgrounds reveal the significance of the historical, cultural and political approaches in understanding higher education development in the Chinese societies. We adopt an inter-referencing approach that takes the variation of Chineseness as a frame of reference as an overarching theoretical position to incorporate these various approaches used in this special issue (Lo, 2016). Such a cross-cutting approach allows us to see higher education development as a complex interacting process in which historical, cultural and political factors (including those within and outside the higher education sector) interact with each other and explain the hybrid and/or bi-cultural organisational settings of university in the five Chinese societies.

Here we borrow Chen's (2010) theorisation on the processes of de-colonialisation, de-imperialisation and de-Cold war to critically review Eurocentrism that historically frames higher education modernisation in non-Western contexts. Specifically, the notions of de-colonialisation and de-imperialisation critically illustrate the deep-rooted colonial mentality and imperialist desire, with which the former Asian colonised societies see their colonisers as superiors and are eager to build or restore their supremacy in light of the models of their colonisers. Such a mentality, which is observed in the five Chinese societies, explains why these societies have an unconscious desire to emulate the West in pursuit of modernity and prosperity. In this historical and cultural context, instead of a geographical site, the West mainly refers to an imaginary site of modernity resulting from the binary worldviews (i.e. the East/China versus the West) (Chen, 2010; Lin, 2012). Given that subjectivity is built and transformed in this epistemological binarism, Chineseness, as a node in the binary system, matters in higher education development in the selected societies.

The notion of de-Cold war helps us link the historical and cultural issues with the current geo-political circumstances. As Chen (2010) argues, the post-colonial aftermath in Asia is deeply defined by the Cold war imaginary—the bad guy/the communist East versus the good guy/the democratic West, or vice versa. He criticises that this Cold war imaginary reinforces the colonial imaginary of the global hierarchical structure. Consequently, the East–West binarism becomes the binarism of 'bad, inferior, backward and uncivilised' and 'good, superior, modern and civilised'. This theorisation illustrates how the dual hegemonic framework of contemporary global political economy is significant in understanding higher education development in the Chinese societies, as it reveals that global political confrontation comprises competition for superiority in social and cultural configurations. Indeed, when the Chinese government related education to the revitalisation of the Chinese nation and determined to enhance China's influence on global

governance in the early 2000s, an ‘outward-oriented’ form of higher education internationalisation had emerged as a way to export Chinese knowledge to the world and increase China’s soft power (Wu, 2019). However, given its emphasis on state nationalism or socialist patriotism that is integrated with the political philosophy and beliefs of the Chinese Communist Party (Zheng & Kapoor, 2021), such attempt at cultural diplomacy is labelled as ‘soft power with Chinese characteristics’ or critically speaking, ‘sharp power’ and has consequently intensified Western powers’ ‘China threat’ mentality (Lo & Pan, 2021). This present-day application of the Cold war imaginary is especially true, if we consider the current Sino–US rivalry to be the new Cold War (Marginson, 2019).

These theoretical orientations guide us to emphasise hybridity and bi-culturality that are generally based on the historical context, within which Western influences hold the dominant position in global higher education development. Historically, modern universities in the five Chinese societies are essentially foreign transplant. However, research literature also indicates that contemporary universities in these Chinese societies are variously influenced by their cultural and intellectual traditions. For example, in their historical research, Hayhoe and her associates (2011) examine how cultural resources from Chinese civilisation inform the evolution of universities in the Chinese mainland. In their analysis of the state–university relationship, they highlight the role of academy (*shuyuan*) to show the existence of autonomy and freedom in pre-modern Chinese education, which is somewhat inherited by modern Chinese universities (e.g. Peking University, see Hayhoe, 2005).

Nevertheless, such cultural inheritance (i.e. the enjoyment of self-mastery and intellectual freedom) is implicit rather than explicit, as it is balanced by contemporary political order. This balancing process is seen as a combination of Confucianism and communism (Wei & Johnstone, 2020) or a form of academic nationalisation (Hayhoe et al., 2011). In short, universities in the Chinese mainland have gone through adaptation and indigenisation in their evolution since the transplantation of Western models of university. Similar development of cultural combination was observed in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao where elements of Chinese culture were incorporated to different extents in the development of higher education (Chan & Yang, 2017; Chou, 2011; Hao, 2016). By contrast, Singapore intentionally removed the components of Chinese culture from its universities in its post-independence years (Wong, 2005; Loke et al., 2017). These various historical circumstances urge us to critically revisit the thesis of hybrid higher education in Sinified societies (Hawkins, 2013).

Moreover, research literature has long used the theories of world-system and centre–periphery to frame the unequal global higher education landscape where Anglophone Western countries and their top universities act as global centres and the rest of the world are considered periphery and semi-periphery (Altbach, 2009; Postiglione, 2005; Ginelli, 2018). Whilst this global centre–periphery framework justifies and explains the powerful influence of Western academic models and associated reactions in non-Western societies (Oleksiyeenko, 2014; Takayama, 2014; Shahjahan & Morgan, 2016; Lim, 2016), emphasising the processes of hybridisation and recombination within the context of the changing global order leads us to revisit the significance of the supremacy of Western higher education in understanding higher education development in the contemporary Chinese societies.

Research often assumes the presence of significant influences of cultural traditions and sees Confucian values as the cultural root that can be used to compare and contrast with the global or Western influences over ideas, behaviours and practices in higher education in Chinese societies (e.g. Marginson, 2011; Du, 2018; Yang et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020). The cultural factors effectively illustrate the epistemological basis on which different players (e.g. policy makers and university leaders) in higher education define and assess the roles of universities and mediate the Western influences. However, appreciating the epistemological foundation of culture and the associated awareness of the limited links between contemporary higher education and traditional roots explain the confusion and discomfort that some academics experience when confronted with the convergence of educational ideas and practices brought about by globalisation. In practice, such confusion is revealed by tensions between the pursuit of global excellence through participation in the global knowledge network and the orientation towards addressing local and indigenous values and issues in higher education, especially in social sciences (Yang, 2019).

This interpretation of the higher education development in Chinese societies highlights that globalisation involves cultural homogenisation and Westernisation of the non-Western world. On this basis, the advocacy for bi-culturality, which incorporates the call for modernisation and internationalisation of higher education, refers to the process of identifying the best Chinese indigenous intellectual traditions and combining them with Western-style academic models and systems. This orientation of higher education development is habitually set out in the aforesaid East/China–West binarism. It presumes a pre-existing pure form of Chinese culture, whilst acknowledging the notion and status of academic excellence defined by the inclusion and affirmation by Western contexts. Within this theoretical context, modern universities in Chinese societies, especially the elite, are expected to achieve their cultural mission; the latter refers to their duty of bringing their cultural traditions back to higher education and recombining them in the contemporary university setting and thus offering an alternative to Western academic models (Yang, 2017).

However, the advocacy for bi-culturality is possibly reconceptualised as a competition between Sino-centrism and American-centrism against the backdrop of the dual hegemonic global landscape. Thus, stressing the impurity of cultures and instability of identities, the literature proposes the notion of hybridity (or in Chen's [2010] term of critical syncretism) to conceptually frame the higher education development in Chinese societies. From this conceptual perspective, individual higher education systems in Chinese societies are seen as the interdependent existence of unbounded Chinese cultural carriers and makers. The unbounded nature refers to the situation where the cultural mixtures are nested in the global knowledge network. On this basis, globalisation means hybridisation and heterogenisation rather than homogenisation (Lo, 2016; see also Wang, 2009). Nevertheless, such a conceptual approach to the global landscape of knowledge production raises the following two questions: firstly, whether universities in the Chinese societies would continuously be eager to pursue the global academic excellence essentially framed by a dominant global imaginary rooted in Western supremacy, and secondly, whether the rise of China would form and legitimise an expanding cultural core and marginalise the cultural characteristics and identities of the peripheral parts of the Sinic world. Bearing these two changing conditions in mind, this special issue attempts to offer comparative analyses of higher education governance and internationalisation in the selected Chinese societies.

The notions of bi-culturality and hybridity constitute an antinomy of the rise of China in the theoretical understanding of the significance of cultural traditions in higher education development in Chinese societies. On the one hand, the rise of the dual hegemonic political economy accelerates a break with the mono-cultural (i.e. Western only) dependency in the academia of Chinese societies. According to Hayhoe (2017), China's rise implies that the country stands at the global education centre. This status can raise China's awareness of its responsibility and thus promote reciprocity. On the other hand, China's move towards the global centre may have re-strengthened its sense of superiority and turned the question on the meaning of being Chinese (i.e. Chineseness) and its implication for higher education from cultural matters to political ones. Such a Sino-centric order, the associated state nationalism/socialist patriotism and the resulting political interference in higher education somewhat explains the recent decline in student mobility across the Taiwan Strait (Lo & Chan, 2020) and politicisation of university governance in post-colonial Hong Kong (Law, 2019). Vickers (2020) even argues that contemporary Chinese power embodies a form of 'neo-colonial threat to diversity and autonomy in the education field and beyond' (p. 181). In short, from a Chinese nationalist political perspective, the emphasis on cultural traditions is in line with Sino-centrism and implies the displacement of Western predominance by China's influences.

Such issues concerning the significance of cultural roots, their interplay with globalisation processes and their influences over institutional arrangements become increasingly complex when we consider the aforesaid contexts (i.e. the colonial past and its heritage and the contemporary and changing socio-political settings) and other relevant issues (e.g. the rise of neoliberalism and managerialism in higher education). This special issue seeks to address and nuance this complexity and thus brings together scholars who have approached conceptual and empirical accounts of contemporary systemic case studies of higher education development with a focus on university governance and internationalisation.

### **Moving beyond a dichotomous approach**

The special issue begins with two articles on mainland China, representing the Sinic world's political and cultural core. In response to the question on the implications of the rise of China for global higher education, Rui Yang's (2023) article explores how two top Chinese universities, namely Peking University and Tsinghua University, successfully integrate the seemingly contradictory Chinese and Western ideas of a university. Yang's article demonstrates the strong confidence and clear intention of university leaders in China to assert their cultural traditions whilst adopting Western values. He further explains that such confidence and intention are backed by a bicultural intellectual mind, which embodies the combination of Chinese-Western knowledge shared by Chinese academic elites. Thus, he argues that although modern Chinese universities are essentially modelled on Western institutions, rich Chinese intellectual traditions have great strengths and potential to contribute to the modern idea of a university. Yang relates the Chinese experience of higher education development to the modernisation of other non-Western societies by acknowledging the global predominance of Western influence and accepting it as a precondition for transformation. In this sense, embracing rather than dismissing Western values and knowledge constitutes the ethos of China's contemporary higher education and has become a prerequisite for pursuing the Chinese idea of a university. Meanwhile, the emphasis on indigenising the Western concept of a university implies an attempt to achieve plurality that offers a space for both Chinese

and Western traditions to interact with each other. Such a dual process of embracing Western values and cleaving to Chinese traditions forms the advocacy for moving beyond the East/China-West dichotomous approach towards understanding the dynamics of international higher education. Such advocacy by Yang also entails revisiting his idea of the cultural mission of China's leading universities (Yang, 2017).

Xin Xu's (2023) article enriches this advocacy by offering a systematic literature review of academic discussions on internationalisation of higher education in mainland China. This documentary research reveals the co-existence of educational, economic, political and cultural logic in discourses on China's higher education internationalisation, which illustrates the complexities and ambiguities around the concept. Ideally, internationalisation primarily serves the educational goal of universities. In reality, economic and political rationalities largely underpin internationalisation practices and policy in China (as well as many other places). Then, power inequality across cultures discloses the power struggles in internationalisation and justifies the call for equal cultural exchanges. Xu argues that these multiple logic inform the four features (temporality, spatiality, affectivity and relationality) of China's higher education internationalisation, which encompasses a wide range of components of the Chinese experience of higher education development. Specifically, the temporality is in conjunction with the theory of late development, which highlights the role of higher education in nation-building and rationalises the catch-up mentality. The spatiality contextualises the internationalisation by acknowledging the lack of connection with the Western world before the Open-Door policy and reiterating the centre-periphery relationship between China and the West. The affective and relational elements then embody uncertainties about higher education internationalisation from geopolitical and nationalistic perspectives. Xu's analysis of the discourses leads to a critical reflection on the collective senses of nostalgia and victimisation derived from memories of the past glories and trauma in China. Based on this reflection, Xu advocates abandoning the dichotomies between empirical and theoretical/conceptual research, China and the West, the global and national, the centre and periphery in future research on China's higher education internationalisation.

The contributions by Yang and Xu urge us to rethink the theoretical assumption about the competition between Sino- and American-centrism against the backdrop of the dual hegemonic global landscape. Despite acknowledging the existence of dichotomous thinking, both authors deny the zero-sum fallacy of the impacts of the rise of China on global higher education. Instead, they stress the possibility of plurality, which is broadly in line with the inter-referencing approach to higher education modernisation and internationalisation in Chinese societies (Lo, 2016).

### **Reconfiguring governmentality in the post-colonial contexts**

Representing the peripheral parts of the Sinic world, the special issue also features articles that are sensitively attuned to the combination of Western and Chinese norms and values in the higher education sector of Macao, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Drawing on the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, Sou Kuan Vong and William Yat Wai Lo's (2023) article exemplifies how neoliberalism and Chinese nationalism simultaneously inform the governmental rationalities and technologies in post-colonial Macao's higher education. Vong and Lo use a case study to reveal how higher education in Macao has been reshaped by neoliberalism and Chinese nationalism, which compose the tendencies of governmental rationalities in post-colonial Macao. They further

explain how the neoliberal logic and nationalistic discourses frame the governing technologies by illustrating how managerialism and cross-border integration between Macao and the Chinese mainland are emphasised in higher education after the handover. Whilst the managerial reforms vividly show neoliberal influences on Macau's higher education, the emphasis on cooperation and integration with the mainland is considered an initiative to promote a process of Sinification that embodies Chinese nationalism.

Similarly, William Yat Wai Lo's (2023) article explains the path of higher education development and governance in post-colonial Hong Kong in light of the concept of hybridity. Lo delineates the colonial legacy that expresses the political and cultural proximity to Chineseness and Westernness and presents it as the emergence and continuity of hybridity before and after the handover. He suggests that within the context of higher education, such hybridity refers to the existence of the Western-styled university governance that simultaneously stresses the university autonomy and academic freedom and managerial values within the political settings featured with a strong, centralised party-state. Then, the tensions and conflicts caused by the rise of localism and political activism feature the post-colonial challenges that refer to the fundamental dilemma between becoming Chinese and remaining hybrid. These challenges characterise university governance in post-colonial Hong Kong. The political changes, triggered by the 2019 protests and revealed by the enactment of a national security law in 2020, manifest a Sinification process in Hong Kong's higher education and beyond.

Both articles engage with the emergence of nationalist discourse and policy initiatives within the context of the global prevalence of neoliberal managerialism. They interrogate the intertwining and evolution of neoliberal and nationalist narratives and regard the combination of the narratives as a post-neoliberal mode of governmentality that generally depicts revisions of the neoliberalisation process and features higher education governance within the 'One Country, Two Systems' context. Such interrogation clarifies how governmentality is reconfigured within the contexts of post-colonial and peripheral Chinese societies and thus contributes to a broader understanding of the centre-periphery relations between the Chinese central state and local institutions. Overall, although the two articles identify differences in higher education governance between post-colonial Macao and Hong Kong, they concurrently expose a Sinification process in the two Special Administrative Regions of China, given the changed political and economic circumstances in the post-colonial era.

The article by Sheng-Ju Chan, Cheng-Cheng Yang and William Yat Wai Lo (2023) offers an account of the interplay among different driving forces for change in Taiwan's higher education. Specifically, Chan, Yang and Lo consider the adoption of Western neoliberalism in Taiwan's higher education governance as a hybridisation process in which the influences of political democratisation, social liberalisation and Chinese cultural traditions interact with contemporary Western norms and values. Although Taiwan attempts to adopt neoliberal policies and practices in its higher education sector, resistance backed by the cultural, political and historical factors to neoliberal reforms leads to the moderation of competitive ethos and the retention of state presence and intervention. In this sense, the article exemplifies how the entanglement of various factors influences Taiwan's higher education governance and how Western norms and values are absorbed, questioned and resisted during the hybridisation process. Thus, it articulates revisions of the neoliberalisation process and extends the discussion on post-neoliberal governmentality. The

discussion on the prevalence of Taiwanese localism/nationalism and identity and the resulting formation of Taiwanisation also offers a political perspective from which higher education development is analysed within the Chinese centre–periphery framework.

### **Deconstructing Chineseness in the multi-cultural contexts**

In light of the conceptual approach that sees comparing the Chinese representations outside China as a way to interrogate the idea of being Chinese (Wang, 2009), the final two articles in this special issue turn to examine Chineseness in non-Chinese higher education systems. Using her theory of identity grafting that illustrates how people selectively and unintentionally reconstruct historical themes to understand their cultural identities, Daphnee Hui Lin Lee (2023) explores how contemporary Chinese Singaporean professionals reconstruct their historical memories influenced by their family and educational backgrounds, thereby exemplifying the implication of Chineseness for higher education development in Singapore's post-colonial and multi-cultural contexts. She identifies four forms of identity grafting strategies to represent intercultural relations in higher education and professional settings in Singapore. Blended identity highlights how people transcend identity boundaries to advance their individual and organisational interests. Repressed identity shows that self-identity is repressed when it is mismatched with the powerful. Integrated identity suggests a strategy to include and represent diverse partisan interests at the organisational level. Born-again identity reveals how people embrace kinship identities and resist non-kinship identities to represent kin interests. Lee argues that people's reconstruction of their cultural identities is essentially connected with Singapore's higher education history, the relationship between the state and universities in Singapore and the global landscape of higher education. She further relates the identity repression to power relations and social strata in the post-colonial contexts. She also connects the born-again, integrated and blended identity grafting strategies with the global positioning and competitiveness of Singapore and its higher education. In sum, focusing on cultural identity, Lee demonstrates the implications of the transformation of Chineseness among ethnic Chinese from Singapore for higher education development in the city-state.

Adopting a three-level approach, the article by Ying Li and Chang Da Wan (2023) examines the narratives of Chineseness in the context of higher education in Southeast Asia. At the macro level, Li and Wan review the attitudes of individual Southeast Asian countries towards China's economic rise. This review sets up the socio-economic-political and geopolitical backdrop against which Li and Wan examine the institutionalisation of Chineseness in education in Singapore and Malaysia where ethnic Chinese communities were allowed to maintain their identity and a complete system of Chinese education existed. As Singapore banned using Chinese as the medium of instruction in higher education in 1980, Malaysia became the only Southeast Asian country that allows the existence of a complete Chinese education system. In this context, Li and Wan explore the institutional development of the Chinese education system in Malaysia, thereby exemplifying the significance of Chineseness at the meso/institutional level. They report that individual colleges run by Chinese communities distinctly portrayed and presented their Chinese identity and heritage. Therefore, they argue that such differences entail the dynamic of Chineseness in Malaysia's multi-ethnic/cultural context, although non-Chinese Malaysians tend to neglect the differences and generalise the colleges as Chinese higher education institutions. Li and Wan then analyse the variability of Chineseness at the micro/individual level. They argue that this analysis of the micro-



level individual conception of Chineseness shows the entanglement of the historical, cultural, socio-political, economic and geopolitical variables at both macro and meso levels. Therefore, they suggest a multiplicity of Chineseness in higher education.

To sum up, this special issue offers a collection of contributions that seek to advance our comprehension of Chinese perspectives on higher education through a fuller assessment of the complex connections between higher education and historical, cultural, socio-political, economic and geopolitical factors. Despite their diverse interpretations of Chinese perspectives, the contributors share the view that a discussion on the Chinese ideas of higher education and their relations with non-Chinese elements enriches our understanding of the intercultural and intracultural dimensions of higher education governance.

## Notes

1. Whether Singapore can be put within the Chinese centre–periphery framework is debatable (Haring, 1993; Lim, 2009). To illustrate the significance of the East/China–West binarism in understanding higher education, we expediently use the term ‘Chinese societies’ to include the five selected societies.

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