Internationalization of Chinese Higher Education: Is It Westernization?

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Abstract
Internationalization has become a strategic policy priority for many Chinese higher education in the process of becoming world-class universities. However, there is little research focusing on students’ experiences of internationalization at home. This research investigates how Chinese undergraduates interpreted and experienced internationalization at a prestigious university in China. Data for the study were collected through policy document analysis, semi-structured interviews with students, and site visits. The results of the study reveal that students perceive internationalization as Westernization, question the prominence of English in the university’s internationalization in both formal and informal curricula, and raise concerns about unequal access to internationalization. The study interrogates the unidirectional orientation of internationalization between China and the developed Western world. It calls for an approach to the de-Westernization of internationalization, reclaiming indigenous Chinese epistemology, language, and culture. The findings have important implications for an alternative social imaginary of internationalization for researchers and policymakers.

Keywords
internationalization, higher education, Westernization, internationalization at home, policy, student mobility, China

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Introduction

The internationalization of Chinese higher education is accelerating at a rapid pace over the past 40 years. Yang (2016) traces the internationalization of Chinese higher education to the late 1970s when it was introduced as a national strategy to modernize China. According to Yang, the internationalization of Chinese higher education usually takes three major forms: studying abroad, integrating an international dimension into university teaching and learning, and providing transnational programs in cooperation with overseas institutional partners in Chinese universities. Having gone through stages of development, by the 1990s China has established a comprehensive program of higher education internationalization. Yang argues that the seemingly successful Chinese experience is full of tensions and paradoxical movements. One such tension relates to the Western dominance in China’s approaches to internationalizing its higher education. He points out that China’s strategies of internationalization have been most strikingly featured by its vigorous engagement with the Western societies with the embrace of English as its dominant business language. Through the powerful presence of the West, Yang argues, Western knowledge has been systematically institutionalized in the school curriculum, university disciplines, official ideology, and even daily discourses. Against this backdrop, we ask the question: Does internationalization equal Westernization? Much of this debate is taken up in this article by focusing on students’ perspectives and experiences of internationalization at home (IaH). In particular, it explores how internationalization is understood and experienced by undergraduate students through IaH in China, a topic that is underresearched. How, we ask, do these students experience internationalization at home and, as a result, what does internationalization mean to them? This study calls for an approach to internationalization that aims to de-Westernize the ideological underpinnings of colonial relations of rule, especially in terms of its privileging of Eurocentric thought and education and Eurocentrism as normative processes of knowledge production, and to value Chinese language and epistemology.

Literature Review

Defining Internationalization

Despite an increased use of internationalization in describing the international dimension of higher education, there has been a great deal of confusion about what it really means. For some, it refers to the academic mobility of students and faculty, international linkages and partnerships, and new international academic programs and research initiatives (Guo & Chase, 2011; Huang, 2003). For others, it means the delivery of education to other countries through satellite programs and campuses. De Wit et al. (2015, p. 29) revised Knight’s (2004) widely cited definition of internationalization as follows:

[Internationalization is] the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education,
in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society.

Critical scholars see internationalization as a reflection of “a complex, chaotic and unpredictable edubusiness, whose prioritization of the financial ‘bottom line’ has supplanted clear normative educational and, indeed, overtly ideological intents” (Luke, 2010, p. 44). From the second half of the 1990s onwards, the principle driving force for internationalization has shifted to its neoliberal approach driven by economic motives. International students and international activities are used by many institutions in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States as revenue generation. In addition to international student recruitment, preparing graduates for the global competitive labor market and attracting top talent for the knowledge economy have also become important pillars of the internationalization of higher education over the past decade (de Wit et al., 2015).

**Internationalization at Home (IaH)**

IaH moves beyond the mobility of persons to internationalize the education of students who would never leave their home country (Wächter, 2003). Our study takes on the definition of IaH as the “purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic environments” (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 69). Formal curriculum refers to the syllabus as well as the planned activities that students must undertake to fulfill their degree program, while informal curriculum includes various support services and activities organized by the university that are not formally assessed but may support learning (Leask, 2015). Internationalization of the curriculum aims to incorporate “international, intercultural, and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a program of study” (Leask, 2009, p. 209).

Most relevant research on IaH has been done in North American (Agnew & Kahn, 2014; Soria & Troisi, 2014) and European (Almeida et al., 2019; Robson et al., 2018) contexts, and insufficient attention has been paid to Asian contexts, especially China, where IaH has grown rapidly. For the North American context, Agnew and Kahn (2014) provided practical models and analytical frameworks for pursuing IaH curriculum internationalization in the United States. Soria and Troisi (2014) examined students’ participation in study abroad and IaH activities through a survey with 160 undergraduate students across nine large public universities in the United States. The results of this study suggested that students’ participation at IaH might yield greater perceived benefits than study abroad for students’ development of global, international, and intercultural (GII) competencies. This quantitative study relies on students’ self-reported development of GII competencies in relation to IaH, but students’ actual levels of GII competencies are not directly measured.

Beyond the North American context, Robson et al. (2018) study showed that administrators in two universities in the United Kingdom and Portugal perceived IaH
as a means to improve their universities’ global ranking rather than the international aspects of the curriculum, teaching practices, and student experiences. Almeida et al.’s (2019, p. 211) study revealed that faculty at one university in Brazil stated that even though their curriculum is localized, they “have an academic culture that is Euro- and ethno-centred.” Limited studies were based on students’ experiences of IhA.

**Internationalization of China’s Higher Education**

Over the past four decades since China’s economic reform and opening up in 1978, China has committed to establishing world-class universities. Internationalization is increasingly seen as an important indicator of the creation of world-class universities, enhancing China’s national competitiveness and international influence. In the earlier post-1978 phases, movements toward the international in education primarily followed the inward-oriented internationalization approach focusing on the practice of selecting and sending students abroad mainly to the United States and the United Kingdom (Wu & Zha, 2018). During this time, the movement of Chinese students to study overseas was almost entirely induced by government policy in deciding the purpose and where to send the students (Liu & Liu, 2016). The Chinese government has also encouraged universities to engage in developing transnational articulation programs with international partners in an attempt to internationalize Chinese higher education (Dai, 2020). Until the early 2000s, there was a huge gap between the inbound and outbound students, leading to a serious brain drain for China (Liu & Liu, 2016). As the largest source country of international students for many receiving countries, Liu and Liu argue, today student mobility between China and the rest of the world remains the central plank of internationalization. By 2017, enrolments of Chinese international students in higher education reached 23% or 860,000 in Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD, 2019).

Wang (2014) examined the changing discourse of internationalization in national policy in China, moving from awareness and active response to manipulation. She highlighted the shift in discourse as internationalization with Chinese characteristics: “walking on two legs,” which refers to state initiatives to attract Chinese and international talents to work in China and to promote the Chinese model and value globally. For Chinese research universities, internationalization is manifested in talent development, internationalizing the curriculum, faculty and student mobility, international research collaboration, and administrative cooperation (Yuan, 2011). Many Chinese research universities have invested in high salaries to employ international professors and set up courses using English as a medium of instruction (EMI) with the assumption that such courses will develop student talent with an international vision. For example, Tsinghua University has created more than 200 EMI courses for undergraduate students (Yuan, 2011). However, instruction in English does not automatically lead to more international understanding. Besides hiring international professors, many Chinese universities have introduced the most recent original English textbooks from such American universities as Harvard, Stanford, and MIT (Huang, 2006). This
creates tensions between internationalization and localization and could negate Chinese localized knowledge.

Another important issue of internationalization pertains to regional gaps within China and disparities between different types of universities. For example, Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Guangdong, and Jiangsu usually attract the largest number of international students, while remote areas (e.g., Qinghai, Ningxia, Guizhou, Shanxi) may only receive fewer than 500 annually (Liu & Liu, 2016). In a study with 1,264 students from 39 higher education institutions in Beijing, Ma and Yue (2015) revealed that students from “the Project 985” universities (elite research universities in China) had more opportunities to participate in internationalization activities, such as student mobility, international curriculum, and research collaboration than those from other universities. They pointed out that participation in internationalization activities contributed highly to the improvement in students’ intercultural competency. Similar to Soria and Troisi’s (2014) study, Ma and Yue’s findings rely on students’ self-reported beliefs, and their actual intercultural competency is not directly measured. The previous studies on IaH in China have not investigated students’ actual experiences of IaH. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by exploring how students experience and interpret IaH at a top-ranked university in China.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws from philosopher Charles Taylor’s (2007) discussion of social coordination under the rubric of the “social imaginary.” A social imaginary may originate among political or intellectual elites, but by definition it is a “common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). Social imaginaries are surely an ineluctable aspect of human sociality. Indeed, it is hard to think of any human lacking the ability to “imagine their social existence, how they fit in together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deep normative notion and images which underlie these expectations” (Taylor, 2007, p. 171). Members of a community in which a given social imaginary holds sway are not helpless dupes of its positive manifestations. A social imaginary is normative, meaning that those who operate under its regime are active in their “ability to identify what would constitute a foul” (p. 172). They can, in other words, articulate both the shape of the imaginary and evaluate its flaws and failures.

A social imaginary can emerge in myriad forms, but for our purposes we propose that our student-respondents’ accounts of internationalization at a Chinese university align with what Andreotti et al. (2016) call the “modern/colonial global imaginary” (p. 88). Such an imaginary, they hold, “naturalizes Western/European domination and capitalist, colonial social relations and projects a local (Western/European) perspective as a universal blueprint for imagined global designs” (p. 88). Western national imaginaries have been articulated against their “global” Others since their beginning (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). On this view, a social imaginary naturalizes the dominant
order and, by extension, delegitimizes derelict or incongruent orders that might otherwise compete for attention.

**Research Design and Data Collection**

Grounded in a wide conceptual and contextual framework as discussed above, a case study approach was adopted for this study because as a research methodology it enables a focus on the particularity and complexity of a single case to understand an activity and its significance (Stake, 2005). We purposefully selected China North University (CNU, pseudonym) as our research site because as one of the country’s leading universities, CNU is actively engaged in internationalization of higher education in a globalized world. Stake holds that examining a particular case sheds light on something other than the case itself. In this research, inquiries into the unique conditions, opportunities, and challenges aided in the development of indicators of students’ interpretations and lived experiences of internationalization in China.

The study employed document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and site visits. Policy analyses of public documents related to internationalization at CNU and in China more broadly. Policy documents were collected from the government and university websites and were examined using the method of qualitative content analysis (Patton, 2015). Since China has developed comprehensive international education programs over the past 40 years, it is important to have an extensive review of these policies, such as the *Outline of China’s Medium and Long-Term Plan for Education Reform and Development* (“The Outline”) (Ministry of Education, 2015). The focus of internationalization policy at CNU can be traced through a series of annual communiques listing the main working points (gongzuo yaodian 工作要点) from 2005-2016. We looked for expressions and synonyms of internationalization in Chinese and analyzed the contexts in which these expressions were used to determine the goals and means of IaH. Furthermore, we conducted in-depth personal interviews with 11 Chinese undergraduate students at CNU representing the faculties of education and science, who are understudied. Students were recruited through personal contacts and then through the use of snowball sampling. Three of the students were in Year 3 of their programs, six in Year 4, and one in Year 2. One had gained early admission to a master’s program, so was concurrently completing year four requirements of an undergraduate program. Nine of the 11 were between 20 and 29 years of age; the other two were not yet 20. Eight were female and three male, reflecting the rough gender composition of the university as a whole, though only serendipitously. In addition, site visits helped researchers better understand the information received from the interviews.

Each interview lasted for about 1 hour, and all interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed by developing a list of thematic codes (Patton, 2015). The interviews focused on what internationalization meant to students, how internationalization was reflected in their course content and learning materials, and the benefits and challenges of studying in EMI courses to understand students’ perceptions and experiences of IaH. Interviews were conducted in Chinese, because the use
of the participants’ first language enabled them to reflect on their experiences of internationalization at CNU and articulate their complex thinking about internationalization in depth (Cortazzi et al., 2011). The interviews were then translated into English by one researcher and verified by two other researchers. Because all researchers are English and Chinese bilingual, we used both original and translated data in our analysis. We followed Patton’s (2015) ethical guidelines by explaining our research purposes and procedures, voluntary participation, and our use of pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

We employed an inductive strategy to analyze the interviews (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006) by searching for domains that emerged from the data rather than imposing them on data prior to collection. Domains are large cultural categories that contain smaller subcategories and that are linked by semantic relationships (Spradley, 1980). A four-stage process was developed for data analysis: identifying main points, searching for salient themes and recurring patterns, grouping common themes and patterns into related categories, and comparing all major categories with reference to the major theories in the field to form new perspectives. After major themes were identified from interviews, we brought in policy document analysis for comparisons with the experience of students. Discrepancies between internationalization policies and students’ experiences of IaH were then identified and analyzed. The use of multiple methods and data sources of documents, interviews, and researcher reflections is consistent with the notion of data triangulation, a process that increases scope, depth, and consistency in methodological proceedings, which gives findings a high degree of credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Findings and Discussion

**Contexts: Internationalization at China North University**

Case study has the capacity to generate thick descriptions that go beyond mere facts and surface features of the case to include details, context, and other such descriptive and interpretive elements of the case (Yin, 2014). The thick description generated by this case study gives readers information needed to understand the context of internationalization at China North University. A 211 university since 1985 and a 985 since 1996, CNU is positioned among the country’s leading universities, so it pursues relationships with high-level institutions abroad. Consistent with the national policy, *The Outline*, the construction of a “world-class university” is the overarching and much cited goal of the university. Under this rubric, internationalization is one of seven major components. Indeed, the university dedicates a full paragraph of the “Brief Introduction” on its website to describing internationalization activities, especially cooperation and exchange activities with 30 countries and regions and close to 300 universities throughout the world. CNU pursues internationalization in a number of familiar ways: It recruits Chinese scholars with foreign PhDs into faculty positions, pushes faculty to make international connections, signs myriad Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with foreign universities, establishes cooperative programs
and joint degrees, recruits international students, and, notably, is in the process of establishing a growing number of EMI degree programs. The latter are closely connected to both the competitive market for international students (Liu & Liu, 2016) and the country’s foreign policy aims, typically discussed under the rubric of “soft power” (Yuan, 2011). Of particular note are connections to China’s economic and diplomatic efforts, meant to cement economic ties abroad (State Council, 2015).

At present, CNU hosts 1,700 long-term students annually in EMI programs. In some courses, international students comprise a significant proportion of enrollees. While these programs for internationalization are important and represent, perhaps, an indicator of the direction of future development of mainland campuses, the university also commits significant resources (and derives significant prestige from) to providing opportunities for local students. Students participate in a range of international activities as part of their undergraduate degrees, including study abroad programs and conferences. Much of this activity, however, falls into the category of IaH (Beelen & Jones, 2015). Students are prominent participants in international conferences hosted by the university, mainly as volunteers, but also as presenters. EMI courses are a requirement in most degree programs, indicating the importance of an internationalized curriculum. The use of English for teaching in CNU signifies it as a world-class, international university. Indeed, despite recent political rhetoric to the contrary (Oakford, 2015), curricula across most disciplines are suffused with materials written by non-Chinese scholars.

In the following sections, we present and analyze three themes that came up in our interviews with students at CNU: (a) internationalization equals Westernization, (b) Englishization equals internationalization, and (c) internationalization equals elitization.

### Internationalization Equals Westernization

Students in our study were not antagonistic toward internationalization in general, but they did raise questions about its execution. The following excerpt from an interview with Zijin, an education major, calls into question the accuracy of “internationalization” as a term to describe what is happening at CNU:

> Actually, it’s more accurate to substitute “Westernization” for “internationalization.” If we look at our internationalization a little more closely, where do we go? We all go to those developed countries such as the US and the UK. Besides those countries there are also Africa, the Philippines, and such underdeveloped countries in Southeast Asia. If you said “internationalization,” we should also do exchange with these countries. But we don’t. Our internationalization is only one-way. If we look at this uneven distribution, it shouldn’t be called internationalization. It should probably be called “developed country-ization” (fada guojiahua 发达国家化). (Zijin, Education)

For this student, internationalization as practiced is unbalanced and, indeed, cannot properly be called internationalization. He offers a somewhat impractical neologism, “developed country-ization,” to more adequately describe the core of the university’s
internationalization activities and to draw attention to the ways in which looking abroad tends to involve gazing in only one direction. For students at CNU, internationalization has become another term for learning in and from a limited number of developed countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. The reality of internationalization as understood by these students and practiced in the university is that much of the world is deemed unworthy of consideration.

Most participants shared a similar view. When we asked them to which countries they hoped to go to for study in the future, they tended to choose these developed countries mentioned above. For Zijin, the reasons for choosing English-speaking countries was clear:

The academic discourse is mainly dominated by foreign countries . . . especially in the field of social sciences and natural sciences research . . . and also in leading disciplines. In my view, internationalization is just a kind of Westernization. All the leading languages used in internationalization are Western languages, particularly English. So, of course English is so important. (Zijin, Education)

This student was critical of the dominance of Western-centered scholarship and how internationalization at CNU emphasized a recalibration of the curriculum in light of a Western standard. This resonates with academic literature drawing attention to the dangers of Westernization of higher education in Asian contexts (Liu & Metcalfe, 2016). Students in our study did not receive explicit instruction confirming the superiority of English or of the knowledge produced in these countries, but nonetheless somehow absorbed this messaging during their studies. As Zijin reveals, the internalization of the superiority of Western sources of knowledge might be seen as a crucial element of a hidden curriculum at CNU:

I have to admit that when I search for literature in the university library, I tend to have this inclination. As soon as I see the name of an author from the US, the UK, or France in parentheses, I think of this book as more valuable. But if the book is written by a Chinese author, I tend to categorize it as not of high quality. (Zijin, Education)

Zijin refers specifically here to preferring Western sources, but also to having internalized a negative view of Chinese knowledge. In the following excerpt from an interview with Cathy, also an education major, one can see how cultural pride tends to focus on the past. Chinese knowledge is valued, but only insofar as it indicates the quality and resilience of a tradition past its due date. True knowledge now resides in the forms of an imported, scientific mode of knowledge production that is decidedly non-Chinese:

Regarding education, we always trace back to Confucius. He was the first great education philosopher, creating knowledge, passing on knowledge, and cultivating character. But in practice, the subject of education now is based on the Western system, which is considered scientific. So, the education courses we are learning are inevitably based on the Western system . . . [and] we neglect local knowledge, which is replaced by mainstream voices.
The so-called mainstream is based on Western norms. Western norms are perceived as essential or more valuable. (Cathy, Education)

For the students of CNU, the foreign knowledge seems both natural, more scientific, and, thus, is inherently more valuable. At the same time, while they retain an affective connection to their Chinese heritage, natal forms of knowledge production are derogated. Alternatively, we might see the dominant global imaginary as centered around the notion of globalization (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). In this imaginary, internationalization as Westernization rests in part upon a West-East/North-South continuum. All that is universal, new, and scientific resides toward the superior West/North pole; the particular, old, and traditional are shunted to the inferior East/South pole (Spivak, 1990). Notably, and rather striking in CNU students’ accounts, the dominant global imaginary of Western supremacy is produced and “reproduced not only by and in the West, but also by many across the globe” (Stein & Andreotti, 2016, p. 229). At this stage of internationalization of China’s higher education, students need not study abroad to absorb the lesson of Western superiority. The modern global imaginary lends a “shared sense of legitimacy” (Taylor, 2007, p. 172) to the Western/European academy in situ, providing an omnipresent benchmark for an academic world attempting to move away from a marginal global position.

As Yang (2016) reminded us, Westernization is not new. Since China’s encounters with the West in the 19th century, repeated defeats led China to feel disadvantaged in its relations with the West. So the West came to China with enormous prestige. Chinese people have ever since been obsessed with becoming Western. As such, the internationalization of higher education has been part of China’s salvation movement to learn Western knowledge and technology to make China strong. Through internationalization, China has established a Western-styled modern higher education system. To China, modern universities are foreign transplants. According to Yang, university reforms in China today are a combination of externally imposed standards, forcing China to adopt Western (often American) models of education and administration, as well as voluntary and even enthusiastic acceptance of foreign standards of academic excellence. Most of the international models for reform used by Chinese universities are based on the American experience that are gained through educational exchange as well as international collaboration. Yang maintains that such unreserved adoption of Western (especially American) policy and practice may not be totally appropriate for a country with a very different history and cultural tradition.

**Englishization Equals Internationalization**

Students were critical of the prominence of English in CNU’s internationalization in both formal and informal curricula. In the informal curriculum (Leask, 2015), “international” conferences hosted at the university are conducted almost exclusively in English; however, representative attendees are of the broader world. For example, the university recently hosted the triennial of a prominent academic organization that
conducted its business in five official languages. The conference used only two of those languages, Chinese and English. Even then, the expected language was English regardless of the fact that more than half of all attendees were from China.

Students also found EMI courses, in the formal curriculum (Leask, 2015), taught as part of their degree programs troublesome. As Janice pointed out,

with respect to students, for the courses taught completely in English, probably most of our classmates couldn’t keep up because of our low English proficiency. After the course was complete, the main things we could remember were the style of the course rather than the content. We found the format interesting but forgot what we had learned in the course. The focus was on format instead of content. (Janice, Education)

Xiao felt the burden of EMI courses acutely:

With respect to courses offered in English, even though I was sitting there and listening, unfortunately I couldn’t understand them. Therefore, I found them boring. (Xiao, Chemistry)

As mentioned above, in policy documents, the use of English for teaching in CNU signifies its status as a world-class, international university. In practice, students reported considerable difficulties in using English to understand the curricular content. This is in accord with previous findings of the negative effect of EMI on content learning (Gu & Lee, 2019; Hu & Lei, 2014). Opportunities for study abroad constituted another moment in which English occupied an outsized role. Zijin relays the absurdity of a room full of Chinese students and professors communicating only in English:

During the interview, English proficiency was crucial. Although the committee members were all Chinese professors, they asked us questions in English. (Zijin, Education)

The role of English, however, seems inevitable given the dominance of English in both the global academy and the individual aspirations of students. Studying in preparation for overseas study is labor intensive and time-consuming, as Echo makes clear:

I got 7.5 in IELTS and will retake it in order to get 8. I got 103 in TOEFL and will retake it in order to get 110. (Echo, Education)

Beyond time and effort, studying for and completing these exams costs money, as does accessing these results to use in applications to overseas universities. Similarly, other students noted how English was used to measure their intelligence. Guosheng explains,

Only 20 out of the 100 students in the fourth year were able to study abroad. My academic marks met the criteria, but my English mark was not high enough. I was considered not qualified initially. I asked others to help me write the intent in English. (Guosheng, Chemistry)
From the students’ perspectives, English becomes a gatekeeper for internationalization. High scores in IELTS and TOEFL exams are one of the selection criteria for studying abroad. Preparing for and taking these exams costs students time, effort, and money. Every year, a large number of Chinese students pay for these English exams, contributing to the “edubusiness” of internationalization (Luke, 2010, p. 44). Other than complaining about the high cost of the English exams, students are critical of the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in the delivery of the formal curriculum. They find the format of EMI courses interesting but cannot grasp the content of the lessons due to their low English proficiency, reaffirming problems facing universities in the cause of switching to EMI (Duong & Chua, 2016). From the students’ perspectives, the adaptation of English as the medium of instruction, as part of the university’s internationalization, has not “really enhanced and enriched students’ learning experiences and improved the quality of education” (Mok, 2007, p. 437). Phan (2013) argued that policymakers in Japan seldom questioned the global dominance of English in internationalization policies. On the contrary, the students in our study critically questioned the Englishization equals internationalization ideology that is pervasive in the university’s policy, curricula, and use of EMI.

The students are also critical of the fact that the academic discourse is mainly dominated by Western countries, especially English-speaking ones. In this respect, students’ accounts reveal their ambivalence toward internationalization. On one hand, the students internalize that English equates to advanced knowledge in the West, as discussed above. On the other hand, they question the internationalization of the curriculum in the university insofar as it promotes the hegemony of English in China (Guo & Beckett, 2007). They question why the English language is promoted as a symbol of the university’s internationalization (Choi, 2010), in other words, why the need to internationalize the university is interpreted to mean to “Englishize” the university and their programs (Rose & McKinley, 2018, p. 119). They also question the domination of English and its close association with the superiority of Western knowledge, leading to the devaluation of Chinese knowledge. The participants are critical of the fact that the internationalization of universities in China is embedded within “the dominant global imaginary and its colonial myth of Western onto-epistemological supremacy” (Stein & Andreotti, 2016, p. 235). Ng (2012) argued that duplicating Western policies without consideration of the local context in many universities in Asia raises the question of “whether internationalization becomes recolonization in the postmodern era” (p. 451).

Internationalization Equals Elitization

Participants in the study were concerned that not all students have equal access to internationalization. Here, Diandian was frank about this problem:

To be able to study abroad . . . you are either from a wealthy family or you are academically outstanding. (Diandian, Chemistry)
Participants felt that most students who had study abroad experience were top students and were selected on merit.

We were selected through a competition across the university. Anyone who met the criteria could apply . . . We went through face-to-face interviews and our applications were evaluated. Actually, it was mainly based on grades . . . the top 10% of students. . . . My GPA was 4/5, over 90/100. (Jennifer, Education)

For those who did not make the cut on merit, however, the resources of family filled in the gap:

My classmates who can get support from family, if they want to enjoy more of this kind of internationalization, they can travel to any country. But for us it’s not possible . . . as kids from rural villages. . . . We are limited by objective conditions, so in this respect I’m biased. (Zijin, Education)

Consistent with findings of other studies (Li, 2013), students who studied abroad hailed from middle-class or well-to-do families. Rural students without the economic and cultural capital of their more well-off peers perceived studying abroad as impossible, illustrative of social inequality.

Where Westernization and English hegemony speak to the content and form of students’ internationalization experiences at CNU, stratification indicates the ways in which it is reflective of and implicated in the production of inequality in contemporary Chinese society. Put simply, not all students have equal access to internationalization. The students in this study are concerned that two groups of elites, the economic elite (i.e., mostly self-funded students) and the academic elite (i.e., students funded by scholarships) (Wang & Miao, 2013), have access to international mobility. The economic elite come from families that could afford the cost of studying abroad. In Cathy’s case, her family paid ¥70,000 RMB for her 5-month study in the United Kingdom. The academic elite are those students who obtain scholarships from the Chinese government or foreign universities due to their excellent academic performance. In Jennifer’s case, her grade point average (GPA) was above 90%. Poor students from rural areas or students with low GPAs are marginalized and excluded from opportunities to study abroad. Zijin’s comment about students from rural villages reminds us of the persistence of the rural-urban economic divide in China. Having overcome economic lack and social bias through sheer hard work, the privatization of opportunity comes back to reimpose barriers to valued learning experiences (Liu & Liu, 2016). Furthermore, if short-term study abroad is intended as a meaningful co-curricular supplement to formal studies at CNU, for some students, it is only a distant possibility as determined by their lack of material resources.

**Conclusion and Implications**

The study shows that the participants perceive the execution of internationalization at home at CNU equals Westernization. They problematize the unidirectional orientation
of internationalization between China and the developed Western world. Participants are critical of the prominence of English in CNU’s internationalization in both formal and informal curricula. Students’ accounts reveal their ambivalence toward internationalization. On one hand, they internalize that English equates to advanced knowledge in the West. On the other hand, they question the Englishization equals internationalization ideology that promotes the superiority of Western knowledge, leading to the devaluation of Chinese knowledge. The study also shows unequal access to internationalization. Participants question that internationalization is for elite students, both the socioeconomic elite and the educated elite. This in itself reflects an education inequity.

The findings of the study have important implications for an alternative social imaginary of internationalization for policymakers and universities. Students’ views on IaH contribute to the de-Westernization of internationalization and knowledge. Students’ accounts interrogate the colonial assumptions and Eurocentric tendencies influencing the current ideological moorings of internationalization policies and practices. Following Peters’ (2020) call to decolonize the university, its curricula, and its forms of organization and administration, we suggest an approach to internationalization that aims to de-Westernize the ideological underpinnings of colonial relations of rule, especially in terms of its privileging of Eurocentric thought and education and Eurocentrism as normative processes of knowledge production. As part of the de-Westernization process, this research asks for a rigorous interrogation of how Eurocentric assumptions embedded within internationalization practices create hierarchical differences within internationalizing curriculum and pedagogy in China. This research suggests de-Westernization of internationalization as conscious political, social, and legal modes of embracing and valuing multiple ways of thinking, knowing, and being in the world (Santos, 2014). Such a practice of internationalization and knowledge production would require sharpening the focus on what has remained unacknowledged and taken for granted about the way the world is seen through colonial perspectives. In resistance to Westernization or “developed country-ization” (fada guojiahua 发达国家化), China needs to value Chinese epistemology. China has rich traditions and cultures and needs to move away from “a knowledge-receiving culture to a knowledge-producing one” (Sinlarat, 2005, p. 268).

Moreover, there is a need to rethink the policy of using English as the medium of instruction as part of undergraduate degree programs at Chinese universities. This study shows that there is a disconnection between such policy and students’ lived experiences. It is evident from the students’ perspectives that there is a pressing need to develop a strong critical perspective on the impact of English as a global language and future EMI teaching policies and practices. That is, future policy should call for a critical examination of the relationship between language and power (Fairclough, 1995) and how it functions as a colonial form of cultural control (Pennycook, 1998). Future policy should call for the reclamation of local languages and knowledges.

Furthermore, the study contextualizes the concept and practice of internationalization: How institutions imagine and enact internationalization differs from context to
context, and in the case of this university in China, this is how internationalization is imagined and enacted. The findings from this study are not intended to generalize the experience of all undergraduate students in China, since Chinese students do not constitute a monolithic bloc, but rather to provide insights into the complex internationalization issues that were salient for these particular participants. The results of the research provide useful insights into universities’ internationalization practices. The results also further the discussions on ethical protocols for international engagement and inform internationalization policy in higher education.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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