Consuming UK Transnational Higher Education in China: A Bourdieuian Approach to Chinese Students’ Perceptions and Experiences

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Abstract
Recently, the increased scale and complexity of ‘student-as-consumer’ discourse has become well-established within the intensifying neoliberal marketisation across higher education in the Global North. However, few insights have been generated within a transnational education context. This article is based on a case study of a UK transnational higher education institution in China, where market-based rationalities converge with a centralised statist agenda. It demonstrates that Chinese students’ perceptions and experiences of patriotism education and international education, as well as their own strategy of obtaining a transnational education as an investment, were shaped by the unequal power relations between China and the UK in the global classification of knowledge. They tend to highly value UK higher education in both material and immaterial forms, associating it with ‘humanitarianism’ and disinterestedness. This article concludes that the profit-making agenda of the UK is veiled by its symbolic power, while the nation-building effort of China has driven the students further away. As a result, Chinese students voluntarily participate in the reproduction of symbolic power of UK higher education in the hierarchically structured global field.

Keywords
Bourdieu, China, marketisation, student-as-consumer, student experience, transnational education

Introduction
The ascendance of neoliberal market principles in higher education systems worldwide has raised academic concerns about the impact of consumerist mechanisms (Naidoo and...
Williams, 2015). First gaining prominence in the USA, and then developed in Australia and the UK, the ‘student-as-consumer’ discourse has prevailed in the Global North while developing great complexity, which diverges across different nation-states (Brooks, 2018a). For example, in the UK, a degree of variability is revealed that may not necessarily conform to the ideal ‘student-as-consumer’ approach (Tomlinson, 2017). This ranges from the ‘sovereign consumer’ whose (dis)satisfaction is ‘profoundly narcissistic in character’ (Nixon et al., 2018) to ‘thwarted consumers’ constructed by both government and unions (Brooks, 2018b). Furthermore, in the international market, the Global North increasingly regards overseas students as ‘cash-cows’ who can be used to offset the drawbacks of neoliberal educational reform (Waters, 2006). In addition to recruiting international students to UK onshore education, as their public funding has been repeatedly cut, UK universities have looked further, seeking to extend their market to the home countries of the international students through transnational education (TNE), ‘in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based’ (Council of Europe, 2002). The largest market of UK TNE is China, accounting for 10.9% of all student numbers in UK TNE (Universities UK International, 2019). However, little is known about Chinese students enrolled in UK TNE in this offshore market within a socialist market economy.

Thus, this article focuses on Chinese students’ perceptions and experiences at the University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China (UNNC). It begins by introducing a Bourdieusian approach to the stratified knowledge construction of the global field of higher education. Then, it moves on to introduce the context of study, emphasising the importance of the state in the development of TNE in the Chinese market, and highlighting the key features of UNNC as the first Chinese–Foreign Cooperative University. After outlining my methodology, it examines students’ perceptions and experiences of UNNC education with reference to patriotism education by the Chinese partner, international education by the University of Nottingham, and investment strategies by students themselves. On that basis, it demonstrates that they attribute what they perceive as a shift of UNNC towards ‘utilitarianism’ solely to Chinese society in a necessarily negative way, whereas UK higher education is only associated with ‘humanitarianism’. This article reveals how the persisting symbolic power of UK higher education, which is highly valued by Chinese students in both material and immaterial forms, colours the way in which they experience and perceive TNE.

**Knowledge construction in the global field of higher education: a Bourdieusian approach**

Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction is particularly influential in understanding educational attainment and social inequalities. From a Bourdieusian perspective, social practices result from the interactions between social actors’ dispositions (habitus) and their relative positions (defined by the possession of specific resources, that is, various forms of capital) within a certain social arena (field). Bourdieu (1984) conceptualises economic, social, and cultural forms of capital that are mutually convertible, and can assume the form of symbolic capital when they are recognised as legitimate.
Fundamentally, social space functions as symbolic space, and the various practices all stand in a hierarchical relation to the legitimate culture (Bourdieu, 1989). The concept of ‘cultural capital’ articulates the power of culture in producing class relations, as well as itself being a product of them. Education thus plays an important role in reproducing the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among social classes. In a domestic context, the educational system as part of the state apparatus legitimates the culture of the dominant social group and reproduces existing social relations, to which educational ‘habitus’ is the key, that is, ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 53). Academic attainments are contingent upon the possession of ‘cultural capital’ and ‘educational habitus’. Lower class students who are not well-endowed with such traits are thus more likely to fail in education, and this will tend to be socially attributed to their lack of personal gifts.

In a similar vein, knowledge construction in the global field of higher education is intrinsically linked to power inequalities. ‘The West’ exercises symbolic power that confers the ability to legitimate certain forms of cultural capital, such as the English language, Western lifestyles, and so on; it is an ability to engage in ‘world-making’, simultaneously implying two opposite processes in the same operation. There is thus a ‘stratification of knowledge’ between ‘the West’ and ‘the rest’, where the knowledge of the West is legitimised with higher symbolic value, and thus naturalised as ‘a standard against which all else that is known is compared’ (Young, 1971: 33). Bourdieu refers to educational credential markets as a source of stratification, and thus a necessity for class distinction. Within the hierarchically structured global educational systems, Western university credentials are legitimised as objective proxies for the qualities of their holders and as the ‘ultimate symbolic capital necessary for global mobility’ (Ong, 1999: 90). Furthermore, the symbolic power of ‘the West’ shapes our very understanding of what ‘good’ learning ought to be. Connell (1993), for instance, has demonstrated the marginalisation of theoretical contributions from the Global South, whereas knowledge produced in the North and the South is both ‘representations of human excellence’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 199). This may lead to a racialised habitus of teachers from ‘the West’, which is particularly relevant to this article, given the semi-colonised history of China by the UK. Altogether, a Bourdieusian approach, particularly regarding symbolic space and symbolic power, demonstrates great explanatory power in this particular study.

The University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China: transnational higher education in a socialist market economy

In China, the marketisation of higher education started with the Reform and Opening-up policies implemented by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. Since then, the boundary around education as one of the previously state-controlled areas has been penetrated by the market-based sphere, and state-based redistributive inequalities have been gradually replaced by individual performance in shaping social stratifications (Bian, 2002). Higher education has been largely depoliticised, shifting its focus away from national ideology education
towards personal positional goods acquisition, as all forms of capital are increasingly actively convertible into each other within the newly emerging market economy (Xiang and Shen, 2009). In this context, participation in international education, once mainly employed by the state to send talents abroad to learn advanced science and technology skills to serve the country, has increasingly become a personal choice (ibid). Nevertheless, marketisation and internationalisation do not mean that nationalism, together with other political affinities, are no longer relevant in understanding Chinese higher education. For example, Hoffman (2006) suggests that the pro-market transformations in China have been used to strengthen and reinforce nationalist attachments, giving rise to ‘patriotic professionalism’ among Chinese young professionals, who incorporate patriotism into their autonomous self-development.

Thus, in understanding TNE in China, it is important to pay attention not only to the neoliberal discourses but also to nationalist ones. In the Global North, where the ‘student-as-consumer’ discourse took shape, ‘the state’s right to intervene is habitually questioned’; by contrast, in China, the intervention of the state into any social conduct is widely accepted (Marginson, 2018: 498). The Chinese state is the largest promoter and regulator of TNE. On the one hand, TNE represents ‘a faster and more efficient way’ to directly import advanced educational resources and to train competent professionals domestically (Huang, 2007: 428). On the other hand, foreign education, together with the mobilities of foreign people, information, and ideology also present a potential threat and must be controlled under a centralised plan (Lin, 2016). Thus, instead of a bottom-up way that is more responsive to the market, the development of TNE in China has been characterised by centralised control and top-down planning (Lin and Liu, 2016). All foreign TNE establishments operating in China are required to operate within the ‘Chinese–Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools’ (CFCRS) framework laid out by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in partnership with a Chinese higher education institution, adhering to ‘Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory as its guide and following the basic principles laid down in the Constitution’ (Higher Education Law of the People’s Republic of China, 2009: n.p.). CFCRS institutions thus display unique advantages in the endeavour to narrow the gap between China and high-income economies while retaining self-determination through the wave of economic globalisation.

Nevertheless, in the development of CFCRS, policies often lag behind actual practices (Zhang and Kinser, 2016). This reflects one of the guiding philosophies of experimental governance in China since the Reform and Opening-up – ‘groping for stones while crossing the river’ (mozhe shitou guohe) – which appreciates the openness to uncertainty that may occur while achieving planned objectives (Schoon, 2014). The establishment of UNNC is a typical example. It was officially established in 2004, but its conceptualisation can be traced back to 2000. Yang Fujia, a Chinese citizen, was at that time Chancellor of the University of Nottingham. He came up with the idea of a China campus and eventually chose Ningbo as the location because it was his hometown where he had social connections and local government support (Feng, 2013). The identity of the Chinese partner is somewhat ambiguous. On its official website, the University of Nottingham states the Chinese partner as Wanli Education Group. This is a collective that specialises in education, owning institutions at various levels, including
kindergarten, primary school, middle school and college levels (ibid). On the official record of the MoE, the Chinese partner is Zhejiang Wanli College, founded by Wanli Education Group, which was a _zhuanke_ institution at the time of the establishment of UNNC. As background information, students in China have two possible tracks to tertiary education: _benke_ (Normal Courses, usually leading to a bachelor’s degree) and _zhuanke_ (Short-cycle Courses, usually leading to a vocational diploma) (Yu and Ertl, 2010). Because Zhejiang Wanli College was seen as the ‘academically weaker partner’ (Feng, 2013: 474), the University of Nottingham gained full control over the curriculum and other academic affairs, while leaving the administrative issues to Zhejiang Wanli College and its parent Wanli Education Group, such as campus construction, facilities management and logistics, negotiations with the Communist Party of China (CPC) and government, and so on.

Therefore, UNNC distinguishes itself from most CFCRS that were established later, where the foreign institutions are likely to end up sharing control of the curriculum with the Chinese partners. In 2003, the MoE released _Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Chinese–Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools_ to replace the previous _Interim Provisions for Chinese–Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools_ (1995). CFCRS has been promoted in importance from ‘a complement to’ to ‘a component of’ Chinese education, and the fields of cooperation have been expanded from only ‘vocational education’ to also include ‘the field of higher education’ while remaining restricted to only ‘renowned’ institutions and ‘high-quality’ resources. Accordingly, the required academic strength of the Chinese partner institutions has been increased, especially since 2010 when CFCRS entered a ‘quality improvement period’ (Lin, 2016). This ensures that China can integrate world-leading universities with the best domestic universities through CFCRS, incorporating high-quality educational resources into urgently needed disciplines as well as adapting the successful practices of foreign institutions to China’s actual conditions (Zhou, 2006). As a result, many other Chinese–Foreign Cooperative Universities that were established later, such as Xi’an Jiaotong Liverpool University, Wenzhou Kean University, and New York Shanghai University, with their respective Chinese partner higher education institutions – Xi’an Jiaotong University, Wenzhou University, and East China Normal University of Shanghai, as indicated in their names – maintain a more equal cooperation and power balance in academic strength.

As for educational philosophy, Feng (2013: 482) argues that UNNC adopts a British liberal arts education model ‘as given’. I nevertheless note here that the way in which _boya_ education was implemented at UNNC was a sophisticated localisation attempt by Yang Fujia. Yang’s (2015) conceptualisation incorporates the following three key sources: (1) the prototype of ‘liberal arts education’ in the Western context, (2) the ancient literatures of _ru_ (founded by Confucius, and probably the most influential school of traditional Chinese philosophy), and (3) the ideas of the government leaders. The key principles of liberal arts education, for example, ‘critical thinking’, ‘student-centred’, ‘diverse extra-curricular activities’, have been interpreted as key means to achieve the goal of _bo_ (comprehensiveness of knowledge) and _ya_ (elegance, moral integrity), values that are essential to Confucian self-cultivation. Quoting from the book of Wen Jiabao, the sixth Premier of the State Council of China, Yang explains the importance of _bo_ as, ‘an outstanding personnel should be the one who performs well in various fields [. . .] so that
one can see relatively and think reflectively, so that one can create new knowledge and
invent new things’ (Wen, 2013: 8, my translation). Yang then states that the fundamental
purpose of education is to achieve ‘the development and prosperity of the nation’; in
upholding patriotism as the principle, he writes,

The first responsibility of all higher educational institutions is to cultivate high-quality citizens
for the country, leading every student to develop values and outlooks on life, to have ideals, to
have faith. (2015: 183, my translation)

However, the consequent implementation of boya education at UNNC did not always
coincide with Yang’s original intentions. For example, UNNC has its own Centre for
Research on Sino–Foreign Universities (CRSU), and one of its publications echoes the
‘students-as-consumer’ discourse by stressing the commercial value of mastering both
British and Chinese cultures:

For the Chinese students, they are studying in the UK, purchasing first-class, good-quality
educational services at relatively low cost; for the foreign students, they are studying in China,
also at a relatively low cost to purchase first-class, good-quality educational services. (Hua
et al., 2009: 3, my translation)

In contrast to the principle of ya, their paper argues that students are supposed to be
good at both cultures because the commodity is designed that way and they have paid for
it, that is, because they are consumers instead of learners or citizens. Yang (2015) has
explicitly clarified that, in implementing boya education at UNNC, the ‘cultivation of
personal qualities is far more important than the teaching of technique’ (p. 89, my trans-
lation). In contrast, some publications from CRSU exhibit contradictory values, includ-
ing one publication entitled: ‘High-quality employment should become the value
orientation of university education’ (Shen and Yu, 2010). Such inconsistencies in later
official publications by UNNC, diverging from the original concept of boya education,
foreshadow the doubts and complaints about the changes in their UNNC educational
experiences voiced by students in their interviews, which I will explore later.

**Methodology**

This article emerged from a research project exploring the influence of TNE in-situ expe-
rience on UNNC Chinese students’ socio-spatial mobilities. The project mainly explored
how transnational imaginations afforded by the materiality and spatiality of the UNNC
campus are mutually constitutive of the imaginative spaces conceived by the students,
whereby they are transformed into ‘imaginative travellers’ through their in-situ educa-
tional experience, and the consequent implications for their negotiation of (imagined)
community as well as their cosmopolitan outlook and future trajectories. It adopted a
qualitative research design based on a single case, incorporating interpretivist and ethno-
graphic approaches, to bring the students’ experiences and imaginations to the fore while
remaining contextualised in the unique texture of the spatiality of the case-study campus.
It mainly employed interviews to elicit situated interpretations of students’ own accounts
of what they had experienced, along with a 7-month period of immersive participant observation on campus. Data collected during observations were recorded their fieldwork notes and photos.

This article draws upon 30 semi-structured interviews, including 27 with Chinese UNNC students and 3 with UNNC staff. Accounting for 90% of the overall student population, Chinese students at UNNC share unique demographic features in terms of academic performance within the Chinese educational system, English competence, and family wealth (an indicator of social class background). First, UNNC students tend to have a good academic record. UNNC is a *benke* institution, which has much higher requirements for academic performance than *zhuanke*. Furthermore, *benke* is divided into elite (*yiben*), key (*erben*), and other (*sanben*) degrees (Liu, 2016). As a *yiben* university, UNNC recruits only the most academically high-achieving students. Second, UNNC Chinese students are particularly good at English compared to their national peers. In addition to their overall score, UNNC has strict requirements regarding the English proficiency of entrants, requiring a score of at least 77% in the English test in the *Gaokao* (National College Entrance Examination). In addition, there is a third hidden threshold: the expensive tuition fees. The annual tuition fee for the case-study university, UNNC, was 80,000 RMB (*renminbi*, Chinese Yuan) during the year of my fieldwork (2017). For reference, according to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2018), the mean disposable annual income of Chinese citizens was 25,974 RMB while the median was 22,408 RMB in the same year. The UNNC tuition fee is thus seldom an affordable price for working-class students. As Gabriel (Year 2, Finance and Accounting) put it, ‘I feel like 80,000 RMB is a threshold, which selects a certain group of people to enter, although not very clearly’.

**Chinese patriotism education**

Chinese higher education should not abandon its own value orientation or political features during the development. [. . .] A Chinese-foreign Cooperative University should be a place where Chinese and Western education complement each other, rather than becoming an area of China under occupation by Western universities. Therefore, it should explore a new mode of value education according to the actual situation at Chinese-foreign Cooperative universities, in order to lead students to their spiritual home among the chaos of conflicts between Chinese and Western cultures. Without doubt, the work of party-building would play a significant role in this process.

(Hua, 2017: 72, my translation)¹

As ‘a powerful and ubiquitous presence’ in ‘almost all social units’ in China (Feng, 2013: 477), the Secretary of CPC has also set up a branch at UNNC in order to confine the university’s operations within politically safe boundaries. According to Feng’s (2013) interview with Yang Fujia, UNNC had the opportunity to refuse a branch of the CPC but eventually chose to accept it to ‘ensure that UNNC is in compliance with China’s laws and policies’ (p. 477). Meanwhile, the Party Secretary will ‘interface and coordinate with local governments where his or her counterparts are decision-makers’ and ‘help resolve conflict on the campus’ (ibid). In practice, Chinese patriotism education is provided at UNNC but has been kept to a minimal level compared to public universities in China. There is only one relevant module, Chinese Cultural Courses, delivered to Chinese students through weekly evening courses outside their university curriculum. The
institution in charge is the aforementioned Centre for Research on Sino–Foreign Cooperative Universities at UNNC (CRSU), which states that

For Chinese students, we put particular emphasis on our work of ideological and political education [. . .] We created courses like ‘The Principles of Marxism’, ‘Ethics and Law’, ‘Marxism with Chinese Features’, etc. (Hua et al., 2009: 5, my translation)

I interviewed a CRSU staff member, Nancy, who has personally participated in both the delivery of lectures and the design of the textbooks for this course. It seems that in recent years Chinese Cultural Courses have become largely depoliticised. When I asked for her opinion about ‘ideological and political education’ at UNNC, she corrected me by emphasising that it was named ‘Chinese Cultural Courses’ and had nothing to do with political propaganda:

First, of course we would like them to understand more about Chinese culture, yeah, the dissemination of Chinese culture. Also, we would like to encourage them to think about many things as adults, such as how to face themselves, face others, and face this society.

Her answer seems to fit well with Yang’s principles of boya education, while contradicting the above-cited CRSU publications. In the interviews, only one student, Arian (Year 1, International Communications Studies) said that this module had made him feel more patriotic with an increased sense of cultural belonging, particularly in contrast with the unfamiliar foreign environment at UNNC:

To be honest, the Chinese Culture Course is my favourite. [. . .] Especially, in an English-only context, suddenly you got the chance to attend a course that is delivered in Chinese, delivered by Chinese native speakers, talking about Chinese culture . . . this makes you feel you culturally belong.

The majority of interviewees appreciated the idea of having Chinese Cultural Courses and acknowledged their necessity. However, interviewees did not find them beneficial but merely ‘a formality’. Many admitted that they were there only to tick the boxes on the registers for themselves, or even to fake attendance for their friends. Zoe (Year 1, International Communications Studies) explained that it was common for students to be there doing their own thing while paying no attention to what the lecturer was saying. This was verified by one of the staff, Mateo, who told me that it was hardly surprising because there was no pressure of exams; eventually, what would appear on their transcripts would only be their academic performance in the formal curriculum.

CRSU was concerned by this situation and took actions to improve it. For example, it introduced a digital signature system to make faking attendance more difficult. However, the interviewees believed that this ‘improvement’ only made the students more resistant and confirmed their impression of these courses being merely a ‘formality’. In terms of pedagogies, CRSU also tried to learn from its British partner by experimenting with seminar discussions, extra-curricular activities and guest lectures. Nevertheless, again, interviewees perceived ‘no change in the substance’. For example, Brook (Year 3, Chemical Industry) said,
There’s a mismatch between the quality and the format of this course. I felt like there was actually nothing for me to discuss even though it was a seminar, which is [a format] good for facilitating discussion.

He then argued that students would spontaneously discuss thought-provoking course content, rather than because they were instructed to do so.

Despite their unfavourable comments about Chinese patriotism education at UNNC, most students were actually content with the situation. For example, Flora (Year 2, International Communications Studies) felt lucky that she was able to avoid ideological education at UNNC, thus she could have a ‘free mind’. After talking to her peers at other Chinese universities, she found their experiences ‘intimidating’ because,

They have to learn Chinese political ideology every day, like Marxist philosophy, etc. [. . .] And they’re really narrow-minded.

In addition to formal classes, extra-curricular activities are also used for ideological education purposes at many Chinese universities. Elio (Year 2, International Communications Studies) was happy to escape from these obligations that existed at his friends’ universities:

Their universities have many activities that I find meaningless, such as singing the praises of the Party, and Red activities, which most of the time are compulsory. I have a friend, for example, and the university demands that his entire class do that kind of dance. You know, like sports dance, everybody dances with a national flag in their hands.

Overall, the Chinese partners of UNNC have made efforts to follow the guidance of CPC and the nation to deliver Chinese patriotism education at a British university, yet this did not work as expected. This unsatisfying outcome could be attributed to problems in course design and delivery and is probably related to their weak power over academic affairs. However, it is also related to students’ predispositions, which I will revisit in the next section.

‘Truly international education’

As our student, you will benefit from the unique advantages that come with receiving a truly international education. (Nottingham.edu.cn)

In talking about their educational experience, the students frequently referred to ‘critical thinking’, and often in a positive way. Most students tended to believe that the education they received at UNNC was more advanced than traditional Chinese-style education. For example, Vera was a postgraduate student who had completed her undergraduate study at an erben Chinese university, which gave her firsthand experience of both. She felt that in traditional Chinese education, there was an intimidating teacher–student hierarchy that stops students from criticising. ‘Basically, we listen to whatever the teacher has to say’, said Vera. She shared her experience of ‘critical thinking’ by giving me an example of one of her favourite courses, in which the lecturer asked them to play a video game,
based on which the students had to figure out a research question. By the end of the game, she ‘still had no clue what kind of thoughts I was supposed to have’. However, the lecturer was supportive and encouraged her to develop personal ideas by relating to her own experience. She then felt that it was ‘really impressive and I learned a lot’. Even those who struggled with this at the very beginning have been taking the initiative to adapt and improve. For instance, Elio said that he really struggled in his first year, so that he worked hard to adapt and was pleased with his improvement during the year. He said, ‘to be honest, if you asked me to go back [to Chinese learning], I would dislike it more’.

Nevertheless, there were also students who challenged the necessarily positive view of ‘critical thinking’ as it was implemented at UNNC. For example, James (Year 3, Finance and Accounting) regarded it as ‘not necessarily a good thing’. He acknowledged that it might be useful in many other subjects; but in his subject of Finance and Accounting ‘there are many fixed patterns and I don’t see the need to “inspire”’. Nevertheless, the British staff still insisted on ‘facilitating critical thinking’, which he attributed to their cultural bias:

The British teachers, they seemed to look down upon Chinese education, repetitive exercises, but I think these are good, at least in my subject.

Carol (Year 4, International Communications Studies) shared another example. She said that many students struggled with language courses because the tutors rushed into encouraging the students to practise without teaching them the necessary knowledge beforehand, because this was perceived as a way of encouraging ‘critical thinking’:

The teacher doesn’t follow the textbook, just keeps pushing us to practise, asking for output, asking you to write, to speak, without giving you any input, such as a vocabulary list, grammar table, nothing.

For her, it would have been better for the Chinese students if they had been given summarised key vocabulary lists and structured key grammatical points and instructed to memorise them well before any exercise. She thought a combination would be an ideal international education for Chinese students, keeping the ‘lecture, seminar, and resources from the British side’, while having all of these delivered in a ‘clear, structured, step-by-step Chinese way’.

Carol shared her concern because she felt that ‘critical thinking’ was overly praised. She observed a ‘merely rhetorical’ misinterpretation of ‘critical thinking’ among many UNNC students. In some cases, ‘critical thinking’ was simply understood as ‘rebellious thinking’. As she put it, ‘sometimes students criticise only to be critical’, only scratching the surface of this idea without really understanding the substance. Siena (Year 4, International Business and Management) agreed, saying that she felt the true spirit of boya education was ‘sometimes not properly delivered to the students’. Gabriel agreed that the essence of ‘critical thinking’ may be misunderstood by some students; however, he still felt that the habit of criticising, even superficially, would always be better than complying without thought. Hence, he believed that such misunderstandings should not stop the promotion of ‘critical thinking’ at UNNC, because ‘after all, it’s better than
nothing. If everybody says no to you, you no longer exist’. For him, it was better to be
given the chance to make mistakes first then improve on them later, rather than being
denied the chance to do things from the very beginning.

Overall, the ‘truly international education’ promoted at UNNC consisted of dominant
pedagogies and values developed from a Western context, to which Chinese students
must adapt. ‘Critical thinking’ has deviated from its original spirit and has become a
taken-for-granted standard. The extent to which the students were able to benefit was
largely contingent on their predispositions, that is, whether they were in harmony with
the legitimised educational habitus or not. This manifests in how educational habitus
functions as a system of ‘durable, transposable structuring structure’ that shapes how
British staff teach the curriculum and what they expect from the students. Essentially,
class struggles are classification struggles; cultural capital is by no means neutral but
serves the interests of the dominant group (Bourdieu, 1984, 1996). In an educational
field dominated by Western knowledge, there might be no single correct answer, but
there does seem to be a single ‘correct’ way of teaching and learning.

Strategic investment

Although many students appreciated UNNC education for the great freedom it granted to
individual learners, a few students questioned the ‘value for money’. On the one hand,
students enjoyed the liberty in learning. Josh (Year 3, International Business and
Communication) believed that ‘what distinguishes UNNC from other Chinese universi-
ties is the chance given to students to figure things out by themselves’. Flora said she
enjoyed much freedom at UNNC because ‘nobody would demand that you do anything’. By contrast, Chinese-style education downplays individuality, and instead highlights
features of collectivism such as obedience to the community. However, Chinese teachers
also feel more responsibility to take care of everyone, even if that means actively inter-
vening in students’ personal lives. Educational habitus developed in Chinese educational
space emerges in the struggle experienced by a few students at UNNC, where independ-
ent learning is required. They felt insufficiently taken care of and ‘entirely on their own’.
For example, Zoe missed the Chinese-style education:

I think this is what UNNC is missing. In other Chinese universities, your counsellor will initiate
the contact with you, talk with you, and help you to make use of the resources available at the
university and to fit into this environment. [. . .] Here at UNNC, you’re on your own. You have
to explore everything by yourself.

This is where some students came to question the ‘value for money’. Lola (Year 4,
Mechanical Engineering) said that there was a very popular, self-mocking saying among
UNNC students that ‘at UNNC I pay 320,000 RMB [four years of tuition fees] to study
self-study’. As Grace (Year 4, International Communications Studies) said, ‘what we
studied most was self-study’.

That said, taking the bigger picture, participating in TNE at UNNC represents a good
investment strategy for the majority of students. Axton (Year 4, Mechanical Engineering)
said that UNNC was the ‘most score-effective’ option for him in that ‘with the score I
had, this university was a good deal’. His idea was echoed by many others. First, this deal comes with good returns. Zoe, for example, perceived the TNE experience mainly as a way to ‘improve [their] English’. Slightly differently, Gabriel considered courses delivered in English to have ‘added value’ compared to the same knowledge and skills acquired in Chinese. Overall, Aldo (Year 4, International Communications Studies) believed that the true value of TNE can only be achieved through conversion to a better educational opportunity overseas:

I feel like this university is a useful springboard. For one thing, it’s been teaching you how to use English for four years, for another, there is the Western education system. So, if I didn’t go overseas for postgraduate study, it would be a waste.

TNE experience is beneficial for Chinese students to gain the linguistic and institutionalised cultural capital that is necessary for future global mobility, as well as to imitate the educational habitus in the field of global education that is dominated by ‘the West’. As confirmed by the president of UNNC Students’ Union, this was a common perception among UNNC students because ‘it’s easier to apply for postgraduate study in the UK after UNNC’.

Second, and less often addressed in the extant literature, this deal also comes with low risk. Overseas education may seem to be a better investment to maximise the gain in the first instance; for example, many studies reveal the unique advantages for overseas students of gaining ‘mobility capital’ (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003) and social capital essential for the valorisation of the cultural capital acquired during foreign education (Waters, 2009). Nevertheless, overseas education also carries risks. For example, Zoe explained why she had not opted for overseas studies:

Because I think, for most Chinese students who want to study overseas, they have to complete a pre-session first. Then I figured, my English competence was not good enough for me to be 100% sure that I could get into a good university after a year or six months of pre-session. So, I think UNNC is a buffer. A longer time of buffering will be better.

As another example, Flora, who was very sceptical about Chinese universities, as mentioned earlier, still chose TNE in China over overseas education due to her concern about ‘ending up with nothing’:

I had to do a pre-sessional course first. If I did, my only option would be a two-year college course in the USA, then transfer to a university afterwards. [. . .] Then I was thinking, if I go to UNNC, at least I can secure a degree from a yiben university; while if I go overseas, what if I can’t manage to transfer after two years of study? What could I do after that? I would end up with nothing.

[. . .]

My mum said, ‘even if you don’t like it [UNNC], we can transfer you to another university, but at least we can secure a yiben degree’.
For Flora, studying in her home country at UNNC carries a lower level of risk of return, and also comes with the extra benefit of a good university credential that is convertible within the Chinese educational system. TNE thus presents a low-risk investment strategy, even though the return may not be as high as that of an overseas education. Furthermore, UNNC awards both a British degree from the University of Nottingham and a Chinese degree accredited by MoE. Therefore, UNNC offers institutionalised cultural capital that operates in two fields. Hence, as strategic consumers, it would be better to ‘prepare with both hands’, as the father of James (Year 3, Finance and Accounting) put it.

Perceiving and attributing the change from ‘humanitarianism’ to ‘utilitarianism’

More than half of the interviewees felt that ‘UNNC has changed’ in recent years in many ways. A common perception was a tendency away from the original ‘humanitarian’ spirit of boya education towards a market-oriented ‘utilitarian’ approach. For example, Brook said that they only had ‘real’ boya education during the early years of the establishment. He said,

At that time, we had wide-ranging options for projects [. . .] we were really given options. Unlike now, when it appears that we have many choices, but nobody dares to do it. [. . .] The majority of people are choosing a path that can see the future, based on whether it’s good for employment or applications for postgraduate study. It’s changed.

Brook believed that such change was closely relevant to the changes in recruiting and branding strategies made by UNNC. He then explained that, during its early years, UNNC had been through many struggles as the pioneer in CFCRS. This is why he believed that people who chose UNNC, regardless of the uncertainties during those early years, were really ‘open-minded and adventurous’, longing for ‘foreignness’, ‘international education’, and ‘new/different experiences’. Since UNNC started to gain a reputation in the market, it has been selling itself by quantifying its successful cases of employment/further education. Accordingly, it has become more popular among those who consider TNE merely as an investment, seeking a foreign degree at lower risk. He said,

They just forcefully tie branding to further education and employment. [. . .] For them, the value of this university equals output minus input, plain and simple. The pathways for the students are getting narrower and narrower. When they’re recruiting students, they neglect the most important thing in higher education: the four-year experience on campus.

Students tended to have a necessarily negative perspective on this tendency towards a consumerist approach, among whom Year 3 and Year 4 students were particularly disappointed in arguing that UNNC has been ‘going downhill’. In attributing these changes, however, they were convinced that it was the Chinese society to blame: ‘Ultimately, this university is run by Chinese people with inherent traditional Chinese values’, said Oliver (Year 2, International Studies). He elaborated,
Well, I think it was me who expected too much at the very beginning. [. . .] In essence, UNNC is a Chinese university with foreign staff. [It is Chinese], including most of its learning environment, the learning status of most of the students inside of it, they’re probably just coated by a layer of ‘international education’. I’m not saying that they’re completely different inside, of course more or less they will be influenced [by the outer layer]. But, essentially, it’s a Chinese university.

Siena also criticised the change of focus from ‘enjoying the process’ to ‘the outcome’. Similarly, she attributed this change to the localisation in Chinese society by comparing the motto of the University of Nottingham and the slogan of UNNC:

I like the original motto of the University of Nottingham, ‘a city is built on wisdom’. It’s something really humanitarian. But now, for example, for the 10th anniversary, the slogan of UNNC is ‘Academic excellence, Bright futures’. It made me feel very utilitarian. It feels like, if you don’t have academic excellence, then you don’t have a bright future.

Alice (Year 2, International Business and Management) echoed this feeling of change. She felt that, over the years in the Chinese market, UNNC has developed a successful ‘business pattern’ and has become increasingly ‘rigidified’ accordingly. Aldo put it more explicitly:

The marketing of UNNC exploits the utilitarian culture in China. Meaning, it tells the students, if you come here, you can have a good job, you can have a bright future. [. . .] However, I think this kind of utilitarian culture does not belong to the University of Nottingham, nor belong to UNNC; it’s not integral to British education. I think they should reduce this [utilitarian culture] while working harder on the cultural output of humanitarian education.

In fact, if we recall Aldo’s answer from the previous section, it can be noticed that he had contradictory thoughts on this issue – although believing that the true value of UNNC education can only be realised through conversion to better postgraduate opportunities overseas, he still perceived this ‘utilitarian culture’ as negative and argued that it should be reduced. And he is not alone – there were a few students who demonstrated this inconsistency during the interviews. What is consistent, though, is their favourable reading of British education. Students’ perceptions, however, contradict the growing ‘student-as-consumer’ discourse across UK higher education. Particularly, as introduced at the beginning of this article, the overseas expansion of UK TNE has been driven by a neo-liberal, market-oriented approach, which gave birth to the establishment of UNNC in the first place.

**Discussion and conclusion**

This article has demonstrated Chinese students’ perceptions and experiences at UNNC, the first Chinese–Foreign Cooperative University, which has been profoundly informed by the global classification of knowledge. First, students showed resistance to Chinese ideological education, although some of them appreciated the necessity of Chinese patriotism education and traditional cultural elements. Without having much effect on
Chinese students, conversely, the courses have been gradually adapted, with its content being depoliticised and its pedagogies leaning more towards British-style education. Second, rather than being ‘a truly international education’, formal education at UNNC served to impose Western discourses on Chinese students. The durable, transposable Western educational habitus is generative of the teaching and learning that Chinese students experienced. Third, a consumerist approach emerged in students’ perceptions of TNE. Students have cautiously calculated the quality of service, the long-term return in both the local and international credential markets, and the risk of potential failure. In this context, some students perceived a change in UNNC towards ‘utilitarianism’ and regarded this as necessarily negative. They attributed it to Chinese society and as by no means relevant to UK higher education, contradicting the intensifying marketisation that many scholars have observed in the Global North, and particularly in the UK.

In conclusion, the case-study students have become voluntary participants in the symbolic violence exercised by ‘the West’, experiencing and perceiving TNE through ‘the symbolic veil of honour’ and thus valuing British education highly in both material and immaterial forms. This unique transnational educational space has emerged as an important factor in shaping students’ perceptions and experiences, incorporating the field of UK higher education into the field of Chinese higher education. They converge and, at times, collide, while both are embedded in the wider field of global higher education. Market-based rationalities converge with a centralised statist agenda, while being subordinated to a symbolic classification in which ‘the West’ dominates and colonial relations of knowledge production emerge. British-style education is perceived as legitimate, not only conditioning students’ perceptions of Chinese patriotism education but also affecting the staff’s approach to the ‘enhancement’ of pedagogies. Key values, represented by ‘critical thinking’, were highly praised and tended to be perceived as advanced, even though in some cases students struggled to adapt, and in extreme cases twisted the meaning into ‘rebellious thinking’. Consumerist approaches further affirmed its symbolic value, by accelerating the circulation of cultural capital gained in a Western setting through active conversion into economic capital in the global marketplace. However, through transubstantiation, economic capital is presented in the immaterial form of cultural capital, and hence the real instrumentalism of cultural capital is concealed (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital seems to be fundamentally different from economic capital because its self-interested nature is much less transparent. As can be seen in UNNC students’ responses, UK higher education was perceived to be unrelated to ‘utilitarianism’ and was only characterised by ‘humanitarianism’. As a result, Chinese students highly valued UK higher education in both material and immaterial forms, colouring the way in which they experience and perceive TNE, which is strengthened rather than being balanced out by China’s nation-building efforts. This article reveals the persistent symbolic power of UK higher education in the transnational context and its reproduction within the hierarchically structured global field of higher education.

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Notes
1. Hua was the Party Secretary of CPC at UNNC.
2. ‘Red activities’ in a Chinese context refers to CPC-related activities.

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