Subjectivity as the site of struggle: students’ perspectives toward sino-foreign cooperation universities in the era of discursive conflicts

Xiao Han

Accepted: 4 March 2022 / Published online: 26 March 2022
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

Abstract
While students’ perspectives are crucial for international/transnational institutions’ development, their preferences towards certain values should not be taken for granted, as the possibility of lived experience is confined by individuals’ subjectivity, which derives from power and knowledge but does not depend on them (Deleuze; Foucault, 1988). Drawing on empirical data collected from Chinese sino-foreign cooperation universities, this study illustrates how the constructed neoliberal and authoritarian subjectivity influences students’ perception towards the enrolled universities, and their struggle in self-examination about what counts as truth, especially privileged by the discursive conflicts. It further argues while such critique to the politically imposed discourses represents the first step for “the care of the self” as Foucault proposes, the students have inevitably confronted the danger of the sense of lost.

Keywords
Neoliberalism · Authoritarianism · Foucault · China · Transnational higher education

Introduction
As an effective solution both to education surplus in developed countries and the lack of high-quality educational resources in developing ones (Huang, 2007; Verbik & Merkley, 2007), the number of international branch campuses (IBCs) has surged from 24 to 308 between 2002 and 2021 (C-BERT, 2021). Such rapid growth is by no means without controversy. Scholars remain suspicious about curriculum design and delivery, faculty and student recruitment, and the suitableness of the imported teaching content to the host country. Here subjectivity is defined as the “patterns by which experimental and emotional contexts, feelings, images and memories are organized to form one’s self image, one’s sense of self and others, and our possibilities of existence” (De Lauretis, 1986, p. 5), during which process the individuals internalize the externally imposed discourses and employ the “technology of the self” (Foucault, 1982, p. 89) to shape their self-identities.
Wilkins et al. (2012) go further to emphasize not only the effectiveness of teaching and learning, but students’ (subjective) perspective should be taken into account for IBCs’ further development (see also Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). However, existing studies about students’ experience in transnational higher education (TNHE) in general (Hoare, 2012) and IBCs in particular (Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013) incline to hold the pre-social conception of individuals, taking neoliberal criteria such as efficiency, effectiveness, and the enterprising self for granted and treating their learning process as adjustment/acculturation to neoliberalism, or agentic responses to the changing environment (Coleman, 2003; Wang & Bai, 2021). Specifically, when assessing students’ perceptions towards academic quality, most explorations concentrate on whether IBCs adhere to the same standards applied in parent institutions such as teaching quality, program effectiveness, and learning resources, based on the belief that international/transnational experience should generate global competence/positional advantage for these education pursuers (Tsiligiris & Hill, 2021), and by so doing uncritically normalize student satisfaction with neoliberal “value-added” measurements (Allen, 2014, p. 224).

Expanding the similar neoliberal logic as placing students in the position of customers from educational to non-education area (Quinn et al., 2009), researchers also pay great heed to the cultural differences and the need for institutional support in facilitating the development of students’ intercultural sensitivity/skills. Matsunaga et al. (2021) highlight the shift in this burgeoning field from the deficit model, in which students’ international sojourn is considered a “one-way, linear transmissive exchange” process and the traditional label of international students as inadequate and unskilled until they are adjusted by the transformative power of international education, to the multi-directional transmissive exchanges which focuses on the students’ “agency-driven/agency-oriented” approach to the changing environment (2, 3; see also Heng, 2018; Matsunaga et al., 2020).

From the perspective of critical theorists, such efforts have placed agency and constraints into two extremes of continuum rather than examining their interpenetration, the dangers alerted by both Bourdieu (Harker & May, 1997, 177) and Foucault, as freeing agency from power relationships\(^1\) (1998a). The “already formed” view of the person (Olssen et al., 2004) sidesteps the issue on how people’s subjectivities have been infiltrated and occupied by modern power (Rose & Miller, 1992) during its changes from “explicitly overt forms or ‘oppression’” to “more covert forms…imb[ing] with individuals’ own desires and active participation in the regulation and development of their selves” (Webb, 2011, p. 738). For instance, existing critical analysis about the creation of “manipulatable man” (Olssen, 2003, p. 200) illustrates how the governmental control has been re-inscribed rather than retreat in neoliberal societies by establishing “certain values and presuppositions about human beings and how they should live” (Rose, 1999, pp. 10–11). When

\(^1\) Specifically, the “activating [of] agency, through alignment, resistance and utilising resources that empower them” and “the enactment of agency…generates strategic responses in changing their behaviours and aligning themselves with the norms” (Matsunaga et al., 2021, p. 3, p. 16) are not outside of power relationships. As Ball (2012) cautions, “individual choices, interactions and behaviours (tactics)” as the “microphysics of power”—the basic molecules of power relations (Foucault 1998b, p. 119)—go together in “producing general social patterns” (31). The resistance thus should be the “creative traversing of the field of possible action” instead of mere reversal (Hartmann 2003, cited from Ball 2013, p. 54) through developing intolerance/ critique towards the taken-for-granted exercises of power. By saying this, the existing literature on international/transnational students’ experience do merit for pointing out how such journey provides different discursive resources for individuals to draw on and thus permit the possibility to articulate themselves different (Ball 2016)
enacting subjection as out of free will (Althusser, 1977), individuals are governed by others but at the same time appear as the governors of themselves. Seen from this prism, this study first concerns the question about how students’ education experiences are influenced by their preferences, desires, and expectations shaped (and simultaneously shaping) by the norms imposed on them through discourses.

In addition, while the education institution is one of the essential places to fabricate students into the social order through weaving them in and out of discourse(s) (Foucault, 1991a), Knight’s (2010) concern that “one can question how relevant and culturally appropriate course content and teaching or learning processes are when imported from other countries” (p. 56) highlights the potential conflicts in the bodies of knowledge in the home and host states. In other words, the nature of educational system as “a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it” (Foucault, 1972, p. 227) permits international/transnational students the access to various (and conflicting) discourses, and thus makes the “process of ceaseless struggles and transformations” (Foucault, 1981, pp. 92–93) in the site of subjectivity more obvious than the situation in neoliberal societies (see Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Ball, 2016). They are enabled by the discursive conflicts to construct different perceptions of reality and identity (Mifsud, 2016), “articulate and deploy them otherwise” (Nealon, 2008, 95) as the first step to “care of the self” (Foucault, 2012). These become the second and third research questions in the study: how the students argue against truth to develop the self-identities, and make themselves vulnerable during this process, as there is “the ineluctable link between ethical well being and loss of self” (Pignatelli, 1993, p. 171).

### Sino-foreign cooperation universities in China: when authoritarianism meets neoliberalism

MacIntyre’s (1981) argument that efficiency is by no means a politically neutral concept but “inseparable from a mode of existence in which the contrivance of means is in central part the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behavior” (p. 71) draws scholars’ attention to the silent coupling of power and knowledge in its function of assigning people values. Far from “a juridical philosophy of individual freedom, or any particular set of policies adopted by a government” (Burchell, 1996, p. 21), neoliberalism functions as a particular and rationally reflective manner to make governmental activities thinkable and practicable. Specifically, instead of devolving power to the people or seeking to maximize individual freedom (Jonathan, 1997), neoliberalism actually exudes tactical acumen in governing “from a distance,” giving “the pretence of freedom….in a coercive way” (Joseph, 2007). The states create the “artificially arranged or contrived forms of free, entrepreneurial and competitive conduct of economic-rational individuals” (Burchell, 1996, pp.

---

2 And also than the situation in other Chinese elite universities. The more obvious existence of neoliberalism both due to the central requirement that the courses introduced and delivered by foreign academic staff should occupy no less than one-third of the entire curriculum (MOE 2006), and the protection about “academic autonomy” (in neoliberal sense) from local governments (Han 2019). Thanks to the reviewers for pointing this out.

3 Ethical for Foucault as a project is to envision one’s self constitution as an on going task, an achievement requiring artistry in the face of the looming, omnipresent threats to our freedom to invent ourselves” (Pignatelli, 1993, p. 165). Refer to Foucault, 1971, pp. 357–358) for further explanation about the two ethical forms in the West.
through the development of techniques such as auditing, accounting, and management (Olssen et al., 2004). It is one of the politically imposed discourses that "systematically form the objects of which they speak…they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention" (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). Individuals are thus the subjects constructed and allowed (Ball, 1993).

Neoliberalism is also a new “moral” system that subverts and re-orient people to its truths and ends. Individuals’ moral quality now is “based on the fact that they rationally assess the costs and benefits of a certain act” (Lemke, 2002, p. 59), checking whether add-up happens (Rose, 1996). This is the situation that power works best “when we come to want for ourselves what is wanted from us, when our moral sense of our desires and ourselves are aligned with its pleasures” (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 89), as embodied by the studies which utilize neoliberal standards in evaluating TNHE and IBCs’ quality.

The trend of globalization has expanded the neoliberal influences to all corners of the globe, promoting particular values that shape people’s sense of identity, truths, and aspirations. As Olssen et al. (2004) state, it is the imposed discourse of neoliberalism, rather than globalization itself, that is the key force affecting and undermining nation-states nowadays. However, the intensification of international interconnection does not necessarily result in total westernization especially when the developing states actively demonstrate their capacity against such imposition. In other words, considering that “it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (Foucault, 1998a, p. 100), globalization is a fundamentally political phenomenon about power, wherein dominant discourses are contested and resisted (Rupert, 2000).

For theoretical clarification, the term “power” here mainly refers to that exercised by the state, considering that “in a certain way all other forms of power relation must refer to it…not because they are derived from it…[but] because power relations have come more and more under state control” (Foucault, 1982, p. 224). When states take positions as players in the globalized world, they always demonstrate “national agency” in defending specific interests (Castells, 1999, p. 54). The education system becomes even more crucial during this process, as Foucault cautions, “in its distribution, in what it permits and what it prevents…[it] follows the lines laid down by social differences, conflicts and struggles. Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses” (1972, p. 46). To be more specific, in the era of globalization, education institutions undertake the tasks of distributing and stratifying discourses to maintain internal power relationships throughout the nation. Such tasks are further embodied by strategies including the curriculum design, assessment criteria, and institutional management (Olssen et al., 2004).

As the specific form of TNHE, IBCs instantiate the imposition of neoliberal discourse and its negotiation with state power in asymmetry. The developed countries occupy the central position in the world academic system, leading directions and deciding templates for others to follow (Altbach & Knight, 2007). While the introduction of high-quality educational resources is considered to benefit national improvement, it simultaneously represents a threat to the ruling group. Some Asian countries characterized as strong or developmental states thus refuse to accept western understandings indiscriminately (Lim, 2016) and try to incorporate TNHE into the national provision under the scrutiny and regulation of the host country (Huang, 2007). In the context of China, such local adaptation (Shams & Huisman, 2016) renames IBCs as sino-foreign cooperation universities (SFCUs) as “foreign HEIs, organizations, and individuals are forbidden to establish schools or any other educational institutions independently in China” to ensure education sovereignty (State Council, 2003).
Such regulation places neoliberalism in co-existence with authoritarianism in China. Considering neoliberalism as “a new system of political and economic control” in constructing “freedom” and “choice” for individuals (Olssen et al., 2004, p. 14) and the strategies adopted by authoritarian nations, such as China, that manage their population within constraint, instead of imposing the rule (Foucault, 1991b; Li, 1998), these two discourses are by no means in stark opposition (Han, 2021). In so saying, this does not mean the concepts of neoliberalism and authoritarianism always and everywhere appear uncontested and unified, which they definitely do not (Olssen et al., 2004). Discursive conflict exists between the application of market logic as formative power (Foucault, 2008) and the desire to take total control of citizens’ life (Dean, 2002). Specifically, while neoliberalism prioritizes the superiority of market mechanisms for economic prosperity as the basis for national security (Olssen et al., 2004), the improvement of economic growth, living standards, and political stability is the means rather than ends of the Chinese government to legitimize its authoritarian control (Kennedy, 2009), as “protecting the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) authority and enforcing the CCP’s rules are the basis for national interests” (The CCP Central Committee, 2016). While the absolute loyalty to CCP is placed as “the single most important criteria, often at the expense of competence and efficiency” (Zhou, 2001, p. 1038), the combination of neoliberalism and authoritarianism can never succeed in producing a coherent form of the subject (Kipnis, 2011). The exploration here is based on the students’ reflection towards the official promoted discourses through their criticisms of enrolled institutions, as “critique is the movement through which the subject gives itself the right to question truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth” (Foucault, 1997a, p. 386). It is also noteworthy while the conflict between neoliberalism and authoritarianism opens the possibility for students to question the imposed normative values, they risk “the crisis of the subject” in failing to gain a clear sense of belonging. This is a stage “in a dynamic process…rather than a simple switch in point of view or affiliation” (De Lissovoy, 2010, p. 425).

**Data source and methodology**

The data reported were collected from in-depth interviews conducted between 2016 and 2021. To ensure the respondents’ deeper comprehension of discursive conflicts, they were all then in their sophomore or junior year. During the writing process, they were recontacted to avoid misinterpretation. The combination of snowball and key informant sampling helps to guarantee the efficiency and deeper insight in collected data. Interviewees were recruited until no new information was generated and the total number of student representatives is 47 from 3 SFCUs. Consent was obtained before face-to-face/telephone interviews; each of which lasted 40–60 min. The data analysis follows the five key stages proposed by Ritchie and Liz (2002): after familiarizing the interview transcripts, the themes were identified for index; the thematic framework was then charted and mapped; the last step as interpretation was directed by Foucault’s ideas of power, discourse, subject/subjectivity, and critique. Special attention was paid to critique about the normalized neoliberal and authoritarian values prevailed in their enrolled institutions. This is “a concrete
practice of freedom. Established patterns are to be challenged in order to ascertain what it is that is no longer indispensable for the constitution of the self” (Ball, 2016, p. 8).

**Analysis of findings: nothing is true that is not the product of power**

The word “subject” has a dual connotation for Foucault, relating to the state of subjection “to someone else by control or dependence” and the self-configuration “by a conscience or self-knowledge” (1982, p. 212). As Ball (2012) remarks, it is in the latter sense that Foucault emphasizes how “personal” criteria, desires, and norms are the artifacts of power. Specifically, modern power “applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects” (Foucault, 1982, p. 212). Ball thus suggests that greater heed should be paid to understanding why people “accord traditionally conceived truth [the] ultimate value” (2016, p. 1132) and place themselves “absolutely under its thrall” (Foucault, 1988a, p. 107). TNHE, in this sense, facilitates the “ethical work” (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 94) as positioning students outside their own history and of themselves. They are thus enabled to conduct self-reflection when confronting the truth in controversy.

**The shaping of neoliberal and authoritarian subject**

One feature of the successful penetration of neoliberal ideas is the great faith of all the interviewees in the academic standards of the cooperation universities, although Siltaoja et al. (2019) have trenchantly labeled imaginary/fantasy to the expectation that IBCs could introduce world-class educational resources. From the examination system to faculty recruitment, students’ belief is rooted in the fact that the institutions rely heavily on their tuition fees for daily operation, and the reputation of both the foreign parent university and their institutions is the vital competitive edge in this quasi-market created by neoliberal thoughts (Olssen et al., 2004). As one interviewee from University B stated:

> From my personal experience, my university’s education quality complies with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. After communicating with international students, I know that the teaching content and examination requirements are the same as those of other European countries. The parent university randomly selects examination papers to double check [the difficulty level and rating criteria], so the professors must ensure the quality. (Student B7 2016)

Students’ beliefs in the examination quality may not only derive from their personal experiences but also depend on their trust towards the foreign collaborators. A university’s ranking plays a crucial role during this process. As one student from University A frankly stated:

> I trust the quality assurance mechanism in the sending country [as proved by the ranking results]. As a top-tier university, the foreign partner cherishes its international prestige and will somehow ensure the quality of our campus. (Student A4, 2016)
Other respondents confirmed his argument and pointed out that their transcripts are considered more trustworthy than those from other Chinese universities. As one interviewee from University C said:

When my friend, who graduated from a top 10 university in China, applied for a famous HEI in the US, she was required to have her transcripts accredited by an American agency. It took a long time and she almost failed to meet the deadline... Some of the American universities do not trust the teaching and research quality in Chinese HEIs, but our transcripts could be directly sent to them without authentication. I take it as an advantage for my application. (Student C7, 2019)

Respondents’ confidence in academic quality is also generated by the faculty. Student A2 stated that the qualifications of the faculty acted as a magnet for him when choosing the institution: “referring to the official website, there are so many big names…I have a relative who had participated in the foundation of University A. He told me that the selection criteria were quite strict. The faculty members are required to have very high qualifications, graduating from world-renowned HEIs and experienced in international learning and teaching” (2018). He went on to argue the successful faculty recruitment is due to the much higher tuition fees they have to pay (In SFCUs, the tuition fees are up to 50 times than that of Chinese public universities). The president of University A (personal communication 2017) states, “the criteria of faculty recruitment is set by the overseas partner university…we offer very competitive salaries to attract top-tier talents.”

Besides the constant attention to quality, the neoliberal management style also emphasizes a close connection with the customer–students in education institutions (Newman & Clarke, 1994). The cooperation universities are described as the places where “the students’ rights are well respected,” as “any suggestions we propose will receive immediate feedback” (Student C2, 2017). Nearly all the interviewees expressed satisfaction when discussing the responsiveness of their universities to students’ needs, stating the universities cared about their comments and suggestions. As one student from University B stated:

We could communicate with the staff on any issue. They respect us. For example, we could order our preferred books and the library will buy them as soon as possible for us. We also have some book fairs. The publishers bring the books here and we could select the ones that we find interesting. The university would also pay for them. (Student B7, 2019)

A student from University A confirmed her statement and went on to say that if the books cannot be procured domestically, the foreign partners would purchase and mail them to the Chinese campus. Another respondent from University C echoed their statements and offered another instance:

As a SFCU, we enjoy the vacations both in Chinese and western systems. The administrative staff used to think we should change the arrangement to be more compliant with the western system. They conducted a survey but we rejected this proposal... The Spring Festival is very important for us Chinese, and after discussing with the administrators we kept the original vacations. (Student C4, 2016)

Although scholars have continuously cautioned the illusion that market could produce “equality of opportunity” (Olssen et al., 2004, p. 129), as consumers’ demand is skewed by their ability to pay, thereby rendering market force as poor indicator for social need, nearly all the interviewees consider SFCUs as the fair sites to protect their self-interest within the competitive world, revealing their subjection/subjectification to the neoliberal norm in
defining the “equal chance” as “to utilize their powers of consumer choice and control” (Vincent, 1994, p. 263). However, while neoliberalism discourse has obviously occupied the dominant position in SFCUs, China’s effort to shape authoritarian subjects has also been rewarded, as the following excerpts illustrate:

We used to invite an American senator to our campus, who is always suspicious about whether academic autonomy could be protected here, to give a speech...he employed a lot of extreme examples to condemn our government’s strict control and its ignorance on human rights, such as the Chen Guanghui event and birth control policy...There was no authority or monitor to compel us to say something good, but both the Chinese staff and the students raised some questions since we perceived his arguments as heavily biased. (Student A4, 2019)

Such influence of authoritarianism in directing the respondents to certain values is even more evident under the impact of COVID-19. Most of the respondents took the compliance towards national regulation such as lock down, vaccine injection, and nucleic acid testing as showing personal responsibility. As one student frankly stated: “of course these cause a lot of difficulties and inconvenience...for instance, I have to cut off the business trip many times...but it is the hard time for all of us and you cannot only think about yourself...following the demands of the state is what we could do to be responsible for ourselves, families, friends, and the whole country” (Student A2, 2021).

This is the situation that power currently is more productive than repressive, as individuals are “produced rather than oppressed, animated rather than constrained” (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 88); as “the best hidden things in the social body” (Foucault, 1998b, p. 119), it directs “human being [to] turn him- or herself into a subject” (Foucault, 1982, p. 208). However, while the above discussion demonstrates how discourse represents “what is given to us as necessary to think and do” (Burchell, 1996, p. 32), the discursive conflicts between authoritarianism and neoliberalism permit students from SFCUs to think otherwise. The following part illustrates how the interviewees questions the “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1972, p. 132) through critique. It is “not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged and unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest” (Foucault, 1988a, pp. 154–155).

Un-thinking ourselves: the first step to ethical self with critique, struggle and the danger of lost

In the context of China, the realization of sustaining the CCP’s ruling status involves not only the production of nationalistic subjects who will obey the whims and dictates of the authority (Kipnis, 2011) through political education but also the direct intervention of citizens’ daily life such as banning Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and checking for sensitive issues. This is the situation on how authoritarianism operates for the circular ends as “internal to itself” (Foucault, 1991b, p. 95). Such displays of power appear in severe conflict with the creative, critical, and self-interested subjects shaped by neoliberal thoughts. The open discussion and critical thinking in SFCUs are thus considered by the interviewees as a kind of “freeing from the constraints” (Student C9, 2019). As one student from University C states:
My major is a little bit sensitive and we have to protect ourselves. For instance, some of the teaching materials cannot be uploaded via the Internet, so we print them out for learning, but in daily discussions, we could include any topics. (Student C6, 2019)

Her viewpoint was echoed by another student from University A from a broader perspective:

Our lectures could focus on any topics without restrictions. Actually, when we took classes in Chinese history, the professor showed us videos of the Tiananmen Square Protests...For the examination of this course, I submitted a paper which explored the relationship between the Siku Quanshu in Qing Dynasty and the control of people’s rights of expression in the current society (by this I mean that there is no right answer for the comments on any historical...what we need is a more open discussion, discussing history from different prisms...the spirit of critical thinking is essential to my report) and I got an A. (Student B2, 2016, 2020)

Furthermore, interviewees said that VPN services are provided in SFCUs to facilitate students’ searching of international materials. As one student from University A stated:

When I received the offer, the account and password of the VPN were listed...I felt that I was different from my counterparts in other universities since then I could gain access to any resources. (Student A2, 2016).

All other respondents affirmed his statement. As another interviewee from University B said:

We are exposed to different viewpoints and various information: Google, Twitter, Facebook...People are free to express their own standpoints, and I am encouraged to consider one problem from various angles. (Student B2, 2016)

The direct intervention, however, still occasionally happens. One respondent from University C stated when an international conference was held in the city, they had some difficulties in using VPN. She said, “it was only possible for us to use VPN in the computers, but not other mobile devices” (Student C4, 2016). Another student from University B offered another instance to describe the restriction:

We were forced to change the textbooks once...It was said that the government had conducted a random check, and there were some “forbidden” materials in the original textbooks. We changed to other editions of the books to continue our study. (Student B3, 2018)

Students’ aversion to the exercise of political power is even more obvious when talking about the compulsory courses such as the “Introduction to the Principle of Marxism” and “Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory and the Important Thoughts of Three Representatives,” which are required by the central government in all Chinese universities. As one interviewee from University B frankly stated, “the numerous political courses” were why he did not consider studying in traditional Chinese universities (Student B4, 2016). What they appreciated is the critical perspective towards such politically indisputable issues, as another respondent said:

We are required to take the political courses but our university combined the content to develop a new course...The professor indeed taught the relevant content about Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping, but from a more critical perspective...we could compare
the current political system with others worldwide. I believe it helps us to become “world citizens.” (Student A1, 2016)

This is the situation that the subject is always “the result of endless processes of construction of identities that are to a greater or lesser extent, but never completely” (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 87). No absolute subject exists, as the interviewees also cast criticisms towards some neoliberal norms. In China, the respondents raised within the authoritarian environment have been long shaped as compliant subjects following authority (Pun & Koo, 2018). When such directions do not exist, students are confused in organizing their schedules, both in daily life and academic task, as one respondent stated:

We may have too much freedom...there is no restriction such as when you have to turn off lights and go to sleep or whether you have to return to the dormitories before the required time. And we have no student counsellor (fudaoyuan) taking care of you (such as providing information and caring students’ psychological health), no sense of the class president (banzhang) in organizing collective activities...we lack the feeling of affiliation to groups, you know, as used to do in primary/high schools (or our friends in traditional Chinese universities)...I mean, the self-control needs some time to develop. (Student B6, 2016)

One interviewee from University C shared similar concern in academic life:

The teaching content is insufficient and leaves a lot of key points for self-learning... It may benefit the individual development, as I could explore any topics that interest me, but it takes too much time...You have to struggle with piles of materials and numerous seminars for supplement, and take the full responsibility for screening the related and useful ones. (Student C5, 2019)5

Such “equivocal nature” of the subject may represent “one of the best aides in coming to terms with the specificity of power” (Foucault, 1997b, p. 212). Foucault’s concept of power is an “agonism,” a “permanent provocation.” In arguing power could only exercise over free subjects who face “with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realised” (1982, pp. 221–222), Foucault’s point is not that people are always trapped, but “we are always free...there is always the possibility of changing” (1997a, p. 167). Subjectivity is a site where power enacts and resisted/refused (Mills, 2003); it is ever-developing, instead of being “primarily or always identical to itself” (Foucault, 1997a, p. 290). While such developments change subjects’ perception/evaluation towards certain events/environment/experience, it also represents re-thinking of the “critical ontology of ourselves” that “the critique of what we are is at one

5 What is intriguing here is that none of the interviewees complained about the high tuition fees but consider such charges as “fair enough” for enjoying the world-class educational resources/services (Student A1, A14, B4, C12, 2019). This may partly be due to their relatively well-off family backgrounds as one respondent stated that “I have never heard anyone who cannot afford the tuition fees or living costs. Actually, the living standards in my university are relatively high, compared to students in other institutions” (Student B3, 2017). This is the situation that “people criticize instances of power which are the closest to them, those which exercise their action on individuals. They do not look for the ‘chief enemy’, but for the immediate enemy” (Foucault 1982, p. 211), which could be applied to explicate why students in SFCUs located in China cast more critique towards authoritarianism discourse while international ones show more aversion to neoliberalism (data collected by the author in other project). Thanks to the reviewers for pointing this out.
and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (Foucault, 1984, p. 118).

However, by criticizing the accepted social order and values, the individuals inevitably risk being faceless, unrecognizable, and irrelevant as “a person is nothing else but his relation to truth, and this relation to truth takes shape or is given form in his own life” (Blacker, 1998, p. 71). Among the respondents’ criticisms towards neoliberalism in distributing responsibility to individuals for self-monitoring and management, and authoritarian ideas in putting political constraints upon them, the word that appeared most frequently is “lost,” echoing Marginson’s (2014) observation. Interviewees complained that “it is hard to find someone who shares the same feelings with me if he/she is not studying in SFCUs” (Student A11, A 13, B14, 2016, 2020). For instance, “when talking about a certain issue or social phenomenon with friends in other Chinese HEIs, we are easily to be criticized as anti-nationalistic or asking for too much…and it is also, nearly impossible for us to totally accept the western living styles” (Student C10, 2016). Such situation even happens within family, as Student B12 stated in great confusion and anguish, “my father is very traditional in parent-children relationship and for him it is impossible to stand any argument from me…I mean, I could understand that I may be wrong but at least I should have the right to make the statement…but obviously, no” (2019). This is the process when a person starts to become suspicious about the “truth”; he submits himself “to ‘an experience…in which what one is oneself is, precisely, in doubt’. This is the constant vigilance and ‘permanent agonism’” (Burchell, 1996, p. 30, p. 34), which cost tremendously in bereaving humans’ sense of belonging and positioning themselves in marginalization.

Discussion and conclusion

Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements…. (Foucault, 1980, 131)

Foucault’s observation that “human beings are made subjects” (1982, p. 208) cautions the danger of either taking neoliberal criteria/values for granted to explore international/transnational education experience or focusing on cultural aspects as constraints for students to respond to. From the prism of Foucault, individuals’ values, perceptions, and self-knowledge are “linked to the ways in which [they] are governed” (Dean, 1999, p. 14), simultaneously by others and by themselves: their evaluation/satisfaction is subjectively shaped by (various and conflicting) discourse(s) which confine(s) “what will be known” (Mills, 2003, p. 70) and what counts as natural/true. As Foucault further alerts, “nowadays, the struggle…against the submission of subjectivity—is becoming more and more important, even though the struggles against forms of domination and exploitation have not disappeared. Quite the contrary” (1982, p. 213). In this sense, neither the cultural adaptation nor the multi-directional transmissive exchanges represent emancipation from power relationships, but demonstrate the internalization of constraints/norms into minds that imprison them (Brass, 2000), as “these practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group” (Foucault, 1997a, p. 291).

By saying this, the author does not agree with the accusation of Foucault as anti-humanist in claiming the “death of man,” but quite the opposite: “all of my investigations rest on a
postulate of absolute optimism” (Foucault, 1991c), “to show people that they are freer than they think” (Foucault, 1988b, 9). The respondents’ critique towards the formerly accepted social values and truth, although most anchor in another discursive norms, represents the first step to care themselves (Foucault, 2012), to form their identities/subjectivities: “when we deal with the government, the struggle, of course, is not symmetrical, the power situation is not the same; but we are in this struggle, and the continuation of this situation can influence the behavior or nonbehavior of the other…we always have possibilities, there are always possibilities of changing the situation” (Foucault, 1997a, p. 167). It is a long journey from critique, genealogy, the limit attitude, refusal, and transgression to freedom for individuals to forge new relations between power and themselves, littering with the danger of “loss of self” (Pignatelli, 1993, p. 171), but this may be the most valuable asset of Foucault, as “never to accept anything as definitive, untouchable, obvious, or immobile” (1988c).

Seen from this prism, not only for SFCUs, or international/transnational institutions, but maybe all the educational organizations should be aware that “if education is concerned with values and their subjectivity…the management of schools cannot avoid these issues…[and should get] ready to examine the values, principles, and attitudes proposed for its practice” (Bottery, 1992, p. 2). In this sense, the “proper task” of education, rather than sticking to normalized standards (considering how the neoliberal criteria threat teacher’s sense of professionalism and deepen existing social inequality, for instance, see Wright, 2012), is to “define the conditions in which human beings “problematize” what they are, what they do, and the world they live in” (Foucault 1987, p. 27), to “invent or contrive new ways of saying the truth” (Blacker, 1998, p. 32), to reveal “[what] people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed” (Foucault, 1988b, p. 9). Such efforts are of special importance for scholars if Foucault is considered a “tailor made for intellectuals engaged in research within an institutional setting such as the contemporary university” (Blacker, 1998, p. 348). As Mendieta puts it, “because we have become, we can also become different” (2011, p. 122).

Acknowledgements I am grateful to the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions which greatly improve this article.

Author contributions Dr. Xiao HAN currently is a Beiyang Associate Professor at the School of Education, Tianjin University, China. Her research interests include critical policy analysis; international/transnational education; Foucault/Bourdieu studies.

Declarations

Competing interests The author declares no competing interests.

References

Allen, A. (2014). Benign violence: Education in and beyond the Age of Reason. Palgrave Macmillan.
Altbach, P. G., & Knight, J. (2007). The internationalization of higher education: Motivations and realities. Journal of Studies in International Education, 11(3–4), 290–305.
Altbach, P. G. (2010). Why branch campuses may be unsustainable. International Higher Education, 58, 2–3.
Foucault, M. 2012. The history of sexuality, Volume 3: The care of the self. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Han, X. (2019). Cross-field effect and institutional habitus formation: Self-reinforcing inequality in Chinese higher education system. Journal of Education Policy, 34(2), 267–294.

Han, X. (2021). Disciplinary power matters: Rethinking governmentality and policy enactment studies in China. Journal of Education Policy Online First: https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2021.2014570

Harker, R., & May, S. (1997). Code and habitus: Comparing the accounts of Bernstein and Bourdieu. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 14(2), 169–179.

Heng, T. T. (2018). Different is not deficient: Contradicting stereotypes of Chinese international students in US higher education. Studies in Higher Education, 43(1), 22–36.

Hoare, L. (2012). Transnational student voices: Reflections on a second chance. Journal of Studies in International Education, 16(3), 271–286.

Huang, F. (2007). Internationalization of higher education in the developing and emerging countries: A focus on transnational education in Asia. Journal of Studies in International Education, 11(3–4), 421–432.

Jonathan, R. (1997). Illusory freedoms: Liberalism, education and the market. Blackwell.

Joseph, J. 2007. Neo-liberalism, governmentality, and social regulation. Retrieved from http://www.said-workshop.org/joseph.paper.doc.

Kennedy, J. J. (2009). Maintaining popular support for the Chinese Communist Party: The influence of education and the state-controlled media. Political Studies, 57(3), 517–536.

Kipnis, A. B. (2011). Subjectification and education for quality in China. Economy and Society, 40(2), 289–306.

Knight, J. (2010). Higher education crossing borders: Programs and providers on the move. In D. B. Johnstone, M. B. d’Ambrosio, & P. J. Yakoboski (Eds.), Higher education in a global society (pp. 42–69). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Lemke, T. (2002). Foucault, governmentality, and critique. Rethinking Marxism, 14(3), 49–64.

Lim, L. (2016). Globalization, the strong state and education policy: The politics of policy in Asia. Journal of Education Policy, 31(6), 711–726.

Li, D. D. (1998). Changing incentives of the Chinese bureaucracy. The American Economic Review, 88(2), 393–397.

MacIntyre, A. (1981). After virtue. Duckworth.

Marginson, S. (2014). Student self-formation in international education. Journal of Studies in International Education, 18(1), 6–22.

Matsunaga, K., Barnes, M. M., and Saito, E. 2021. Agency and hysteresis encounters: Understanding the international education experiences of Japanese students in Australian universities. Cambridge Journal of Education, Online first.

Matsunaga, K., Chowdhury, R., Barnes, M. M., & Saito, E. (2020). The international education experience: Identity formation and audibility through participation, adjustment, and resistance. Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education, 41(4), 638–652.

Mendieta, E. 2011. The practice of freedom. In Michel Foucault: Key concepts, edited by D. Taylor. Durham: Acumen.

Mifsud, D. (2016). ‘Decentralised’ neoliberalism and/or ‘masked’ recentralisation? The policy to practice trajectory of Maltese school reform through the lens of neoliberalism and Foucault. Journal of Education Policy, 31(4), 443–465.

Mills, S. (2003). Michel Foucault. Routledge.

MOE (Ministry of Education). 2006. The advice on current situation of TNHE (in Chinese). Retrieved from http://www.crs.jsj.edu.cn/index.php/default/news/index/1

Nealon, J. T. (2008). Foucault beyond Foucault. Stanford University Press.

Newman, J., and J. Clarke. 1994. Going about our business? The mangerialization of public services. In Managing Social Policy, edited by J. Clarke, A. Cochrane, and E. McLaughlin. London: Sage.

Olssen, M. (2003). Structuralism, post-structuralism, neo-liberalism: Assessing Foucault’s legacy. Journal of Education Policy, 18(2), 189–202.

Olssen, M., Codd, J., & O’Neill, A. M. (2004). Education policy: Globalization, citizenship and democracy. Sage.

Pignatelli, F. (1993). What can I do? Foucault on freedom and the question of teacher agency. Educational Theory, 43(4), 411–432.

Pun, N., & Koo, A. (2018). Double contradiction of schooling: Class reproduction and working-class agency at vocational schools in China. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 40(1), 50–64.

Quinn, A., Lemay, G., Larsen, P., & Johnson, D. M. (2009). Service quality in higher education. Total Quality Management, 20(2), 139–152.
Ritchie, J., & Liz, S. (2002). Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research. In A. M. Huberman & B. M. Miles (Eds.), The qualitative research companion (pp. 305–329). Sage.

Rose, N. (1996). Governing ‘advanced’ liberal democracies. In A. Barry, T. Osborne, & N. Rose (Eds.), Foucault and political reason: Liberalism, neo-liberalism, and rationalities of government (pp. 37–64). University of Chicago Press.

Rose, N. (1999). Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought. Cambridge University Press.

Rose, N., & Miller, P. (1992). Political power beyond the state: Problematics of government. British Journal of Sociology, 43(2), 173–205.

Rupert, R. (2000). Ideologies of globalization: Contending visions of a new world order. Routledge.

Shams, F., & Huisman, J. (2016). The role of institutional dual embeddedness in the strategic local adaptation of international branch campuses: Evidence from Malaysia and Singapore. Studies in Higher Education, 41(6), 955–970.

Siltaoja, M., Juusola, K., & Kivijärvi, M. (2019). ‘World-class’ fantasies: A neocolonial analysis of international branch campuses. Organization, 26(1), 75–97.

State Council. 2003. Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Chinese-foreign cooperation in running schools (in Chinese). Retrieved from http://www.jsj.edu.cn.

The CCP Central Committee. 2016. The political principle for CCP in the new era (in Chinese). Retrieved from http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1103/c64387-28830240.html.

Tsiligiris, V., & Hill, C. (2021). A prospective model for aligning educational quality and student experience in international higher education. Studies in Higher Education, 46(2), 228–244.

Verbik, L., & Merkley, C. (2007). The international branch campus: Models and trends. International Higher Education, 46, 14–15.

Vincent, C. (1994). The market forces? The effect of local management of schools on special educational needs provision. British Educational Research Journal, 20(3), 261–277.

Wang, Y. X., & Bai, L. (2021). Academic acculturation in 2+ 2 joint programmes: Students’ perspectives. Higher Education Research & Development, 40(4), 852–867.

Webb, P. T. (2011). The evolution of accountability. Journal of Education Policy, 26(6), 735–756.

Wilkins, S., & Huisman, J. (2011). Student recruitment at international branch campuses: Can they compete in the global market? Journal of Studies in International Education, 15(3), 299–316.

Wilkins, S., Balakrishnan, M. S., & Huisman, J. (2012). Student satisfaction and student perceptions of quality at international branch campuses in the United Arab Emirates. Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 34(5), 543–556.

Wilkins, S., & Balakrishnan, M. S. (2013). Assessing student satisfaction in transnational higher education. International Journal of Educational Management, 27(2), 143–156.

Wright, A. (2012). Fantasies of empowerment: Mapping neoliberal discourse in the coalition government’s schools policy. Journal of Education Policy, 27(3), 279–294.

Zhou, X. (2001). Political dynamics and bureaucratic career patterns in the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1994. Comparative Political Studies, 34(9), 1036–1062.

**Publisher’s note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.