Whiteness as world-class education?: Internationalization as depicted by Western international branch campuses in China

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Abstract
A case study is used to understand how Western international branch campuses (IBCs) in China represent themselves through web-based branding materials. Drawing on colonial discourse analysis and the theoretical framework of Whiteness as futurity, this study examined the case of Wenzhou-Kean University, a Sino-US cooperative institution to understand how Western IBCs in China interpret and promote internationalization in higher education. By examining how Whiteness through the discourse of world-class education has been mobilized and reproduced, this study argued that the operation of IBCs perpetuated Western supremacy in the global higher education landscape at the expense of local people and knowledges.

Keywords Whiteness · World-class education · Internationalization · International branch campus · Chinese higher education

Introduction
Since 2000, international branch campuses (IBCs) have grown to be a unique feature in the global higher education (HE) system (Wilkins, 2020). Despite this, Altbach and de Wit (2020) have suggested many IBC struggle to provide comparable education in receiving countries as their home institutions due to differing sociopolitical and economic environments. Moreover, complicated geopolitical environments can make running IBCs unsustainable. In early 2015, Altbach identified several unsustainable aspects of IBCs, such as inferior education quality resulting from high turnover rates among foreign faculty, limited curriculum and infrastructure, the difficulty of sustaining quality applicant pools, and competition with local institutions. Recent research has additionally raised ethical concerns regarding IBCs, such as the building of Western IBCs in the Global South as a neocolonial practice (Siltsaaja et al., 2019; Xu, 2021). In line with this strand of literature, the current

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study applies colonial discourse analysis to explain how Whiteness and colonial patterns embedded in IBCs continue to cause harm to local and global communities.

IBCs often employ the discourse of internationalization to distinguish themselves from local institutions and to attract prospective students, especially wealthy ones. Buckner and Stein (2020) have argued that, although higher education institutions around the world are engaging internationalization, they often lack a clear understanding of internationalization. Specifically, IBCs often reproduce the imaginary of Whiteness as futurity (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2021) by positioning themselves as providers of world-class educations in the Global South contexts and presenting Western knowledges and experiences as “international.”

In the past few years, China has surpassed the United Arab Emirates and become the top host country of IBCs (Escriva-Beltran et al., 2019). To understand this phenomenon, it is important to understand how the concept of internationalization has been mobilized by Chinese HE and IBCs in particular. In this article, I look at how IBCs in China define and promote internationalization in HE, how Whiteness is reproduced through the discourse of world-class education, and how Whiteness as futurity is reflected and reinforced in the development and operation of IBCs. I employ colonial discourse analysis to conduct a case study that analyzes publicly available branding materials on the Whenzou-Kean University website and draw on Shahjahan and Edwards’ (2021) framework of Whiteness as futurity to understand how Whiteness is mobilized and reproduced through representations that uphold the Western supremacy.

**Internationalization and Chinese higher education**

In addition to the trend of globalization and many HE sectors’ efforts on internationalization, the establishment and growth of IBCs around the world is the result of several overlapping factors, including reductions in public funding for HE from local and national governments in the West. These reductions have driven universities to instead seek international profit via IBCs (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Belanger et al., 2002; Stein et al., 2019; Zha 2003). Importantly, some have argued that there are neocolonial attitudes embedded in the expansion of IBC by Western countries (Siltaoja et al., 2019; Xu, 2021). Welcoming IBCs to be established in some of the Global South nations by both local government and students were arguably an indication of “coloniality of power” ( Quijano, 2007). In other words, many people in non-Western contexts also believe that Western knowledges are more validated. This colonial imaginary, however, validates Western subjects at the expense of other knowledges and peoples and demonstrates how Western ideals have spread to non-Western contexts.

According to Buckner (2019), who has argued “the benefits of internationalization are localized” (p. 333), internationalization can mean different things in different national contexts. Although internationalization is arguably a contested term and has multiple meanings, Knight’s (2003) definition has been widely cited. According to Knight (2003), internationalization is defined “as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (p. 2). Nevertheless, de Wit (2014) argued that “internationalisation in higher education is at a turning point and the concept of internationalization requires an update” (p. 97). Therefore, de Wit and Hunter (2015) modified the definition of internationalization as “the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery
of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (p. 3). Some, however, have questioned the ethics of internationalization. Stein (2016), for instance, has argued that one of the most significant ethical challenges of internationalization is that it reproduces colonial patterns of knowledge and Eurocentrism in a broader, global context and that the existing global system is inherently violent and unsustainable. Stein and da Silva (2020) and Buckner and Stein (2020) have also highlighted the importance of revising the hegemonic assumptions embedded in internationalization to instead promote the possibilities in different ways of knowing and being.

Internationalization is also understood by universities and policymakers according to their national contexts and unique economic and political conditions. For example, following the the reform and opening-up policy of the late 1970s, China began seeking opportunities for international cooperation in HE (Chen & Huang, 2013). These efforts eventually resulted in the establishment of IBCs, a form of transnational education that has rapidly expanded in the last 20 years (Li, 2020). Since then, much has been written on the internationalization of Chinese universities (e.g., Yang, 2014; Zha et al., 2019; Chen & Huang, 2013). Some have referred to it as a form of Westernization and argued for the de-Westernization of internationalization instruments, such as the requirement of English proficiency (see Guo et al., 2021). Others have written on students’ experiences, particularly those with IBCs (see Li, 2020; Wilkins et al., 2012). For example, Li (2020) found Chinese students considered four major factors when choosing IBCs, namely, “personal reasons,” “institution image,” “program evaluation,” and “city effect” (p. 337). Scholars have also studied IBC models and strategies (see Becker, 2010; Girdzijauskaite & Radzveiciene, 2014; Verbik, 2007; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012; Yang et al., 2020). Yang et al. (2020), for example, identified how differences in Asian and Western educational cultures create gaps in expectations between instructors and students and has suggested practical changes for narrowing these gaps.

Yet, despite these scholarly advancements, critical analyses of the ethics of IBCs remains a notably under-explored blind spot in the research (recent exceptions include Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022; Siltaoja et al., 2019; Xu, 2021). For instance, Xu (2021) has argued that the work of internationalization of HE in China is closer to Westernizing Chinese institutions through the hiring of faculty with Western backgrounds, the adoption of Eurocentric pedagogies, the use of English as the medium of instruction, and the privileging of scholarship published in English journals. All of these efforts are perceived as approaches to boost global university rankings (GURs) and strive to become “world-class” universities.

In this article, I build on this emerging foundation of scholarship on the ethics of IBCs by applying a Whiteness as futurity framework to analyze the colonial discourse of a particular IBC in China. In doing so, I extend extant critiques of the narrative that IBCs bring world-class and international HE to China through the examination of Western IBCs, a particular zone wherein Whiteness and coloniality are reinforced and reproduced in Chinese society in ways that diminish non-Western peoples and knowledges.

**Theoretical framework: Whiteness as futurity**

In the context of this paper, the utility of the Whiteness as futurity framework necessitates a critical understanding how global imaginaries have positioned Western HE and IBCs as desired products in the global HE market. Marginson (2011) has argued three key imaginaries of global HE to be global capitalism, competitions for status and
hierarchy, and networks and partnerships among global universities. Stein and Andreotti (2016) have argued imaginaries are embedded in Western supremacy, as Western HE is dominant among top-ranked global universities and leads global partnerships in global HE sectors. However, GURs are not objective, instead they oriented the world in a stratified order (Brankovic, 2022).

Together, these imaginaries exert and reinforce a stratified national order that places Western HE at the top of the global HE hierarchy. Western HE is therefore considered a superior and more desirable product in the global market than non-Western HE (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). These assumptions especially perpetuate the coloniality of power in receiving countries in the Global South, where Western HE—by way of IBCs—has become a highly sought after and coveted commodity (Xu, 2021). In such cases, IBCs are understood as useful tools for governments to grow the capacities of their HE systems and brand their nations and cities as hubs of global education. IBCs realize this via the building of partnerships between local universities and Western universities that ostensibly increase receiving countries’ competitiveness through the provision of opportunities for students to pursue Western degrees desired in the global market without having to leave their home countries (Marginson, 2011).

According to Ahmed’s (2007) conception of Whiteness as a phenomenon that orients bodies in directions that privilege White subjects, Shahjahan and Edwards (2021) developed the Whiteness as futurity framework to examine how the power of Whiteness works to “colonize (or orient) global subjects’ (nation-states’, policy makers’, institutions’, and individuals’) imaginaries and reinforce the asymmetrical movements, networks, and untethered economies underpinning global HE” (p. 2). Specifically, Whiteness as futurity is comprised of three interwoven pathways: Whiteness as aspiration, Whiteness as investment, and Whiteness as malleability. Whiteness as aspiration suggests White nations manipulate global imaginaries in terms of what counts as the future of HE and what Others should aspire to. Whiteness as investment, which is evoked by Whiteness as aspiration, indicates the superstructure of Whiteness compels non-White nations to invest in Whiteness to gain social and material benefits or otherwise face harm. For instance, White and English language credentials are considered preferable and more competitive in national and global labor markets (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2021). Finally, Whiteness as malleability suggests Whiteness and its privileges are reachable. The authors argue this particular feature of Whiteness is what makes Whiteness as futurity possible, as it claims, “non-White bodies and spaces can symbolically and materially project and gain advantages of Whiteness” (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022, p. 3). For instance, a student from a non-White nation can seemingly enjoy certain privileges of Whiteness after obtaining a degree from a top-ranked university in a White nation. In such cases, students might exhibit Whiteness as aspiration and invest in it to Whiten themselves (i.e., gain privileges associated with Whiteness). In summary, the three pathways of Whiteness as futurity interact with one another and colonize the international HE imaginary by determining for all what “world-class” educations, scholars, and students should look like and know.

Whiteness as futurity is appropriate for this study because IBCs were primarily established in non-White nations based on the assumption that Western education and Whiteness are and should be desirable in non-Western contexts. As a result, these assumptions have been inextricably nested in the promotion of internationalization and “world-class education.” By drawing on the three pathways of Whiteness as futurity as a guide, this study unpacks how discourses of internationalization and “world-class education” are used in the branding materials of Western IBCs in China and how these discourses reinforce the supremacy of Western
education and the desire for the “state of knowing and being” of Whiteness (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2021, p. 2).

**A case study: Wenzhou-Kean University**

This paper focuses on Wenzhou-Kean University (WKU), an IBC of Kean University in New Jersey. Kean University is a public comprehensive university in New Jersey that claims Kean is “the only American public university to offer a full campus in China” with Wenzhou-Kean University (WKU) (Kean University, n.d.). WKU’s website defines the university as, “a Chinese-American jointly established higher education institution with independent legal person status and limited liabilities” and “a province-state friendship project between the Zhejiang Province and New Jersey in the United States” (Wenzhou-Kean University, n.d.). Different from other IBCs in China that are substantially supported by funds from private enterprises in China, WKU was initiated and supported by local and provincial governments. The current president of China, Xi Jinping, visited Kean University in New Jersey in 2006 while serving as the Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in the Zhejiang Province to deliver a keynote speech at WKU’s Signing Ceremony (Wenzhou-Kean University, n.d.). The project of WKU was approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2011 and officially established in 2014 (Wenzhou-Kean University, n.d.). Besides, WKU gained support from local and provincial government to become an internationalized and world-class university (Wenzhou-Kean University, n.d.).

As of today, WKU is comprised of four colleges: the College of Business and Public Management, the College of Architecture and Design, the College of Liberal Arts, and the College of Science and Technology. It offers 17 undergraduate programs, 8 master’s programs, and 3 doctoral programs. The university imports educational resources from the USA and recruits faculty globally (Wenzhou-Kean University, n.d.). Most of the courses taught at WKU are provided by its home institution, Kean University, and English is the medium of instruction (Wenzhou-Kean University, n.d.). The WKU website highlights that 68% of graduates of the Class of 2019 chose to attend graduate schools and 43% were admitted by top 50 universities according to QS World University Rankings (Wenzhou-Kean University, n.d.).

Unlike other IBCs in China, such as New York University Shanghai, Duke Kunshan University, and the University of Nottingham Ningbo China, WKU is unique in that it is likely the only IBC with independent legal person status in China whose home institution is not perceived as a well-known, prestigious university in the West in terms of its GURs. According to US News & World Report (2022), Kean University tied for number 126 in Regional Universities North. Unlike research-oriented universities that are outstandingly positioned in GURs, “Regional Universities focus on providing undergraduate education and only offer a limited number of graduate programs” (US News & World Report, n.d.). I chose to examine a branch campus in China whose home institution is not highly ranked in the West to demonstrate the power of Whiteness as futurity in colonizing the international HE landscape in China.

**Methodology**

Based on studies that have argued Western IBCs in the Global South reproduce neo-colonial attitudes and practices (Siltaoja et al., 2019; Xu, 2021), the current study uses colonial discourse analysis to analyze how colonialism and Whiteness drive the
discourses of internationalization and world-class education in WKU’s online branding materials. Drawing on Said’s (1979) argument—as inspired by Foucault’s (1975) assertion that history, knowledge, and power are intertwined—that “the Orient” is a myth created by the West to espouse and evidence the West’s superiority. Young (2004) has similarly suggested “colonial discourse analysis ... forms the point of questioning of Western knowledge’s categories and assumptions” (p. 43). I employ this methodology to locate common features of colonial discourse on WKU’s website, such as rhetoric that: (1) “[operates] as a productive force”; (2) “reproduce sedimented social relations and practices”; and (3) “provide[s] opportunities for...disruption and resignification” (Stein, 2018, p. 466).

My analysis is specifically centered on WKU’s online branding materials for admission and graduates. In the “About us” section, there is a “Publish list” through which branding brochures are available for download. I selected five documents to review in total, including the admission brochure “University Brochure” and graduate brochures, “Proud 2018,” “Proud 2019,” “Proud 2020,” and “Proud 2021”. These brochures were selected because they are publicly available online and have English versions. More importantly, the documents’ range (i.e., from admission to graduation) gives a general indication of how WKU represents itself using the colonial discourse of world-class education. The admissions brochure provides particular insight into the types of students WKU aspires to recruit and the kind of education they promote themselves as providing, while the “proud graduates” brochures serve as products that illustrate the success of Western IBCs and the types of students the Western knowledge economy—via WKU—values and considers “excellent.” Taken together, these five documents discursively illustrate how colonial discourse undergirds WKU’s perceptions of what counts as a “world-class education,” its values as a Sino-US joint institution, and internationalization.

To code the data, I first looked at how the WKU branding materials represent and define “world-class” education and how they articulate Western education as something Chinese students should aspire to over Chinese HE. In reviewing the University Brochure, I paid particularly close attention to what WKU highlights as features of American-style education. For the Proud Graduates brochures, I looked at how colonial criteria are used to define “proud graduates” by examining who WKU presented as “proud graduates” and what work these students did during college that WKU considered international.

I then draw from colonial discourse analysis to examine what was absent in these brochures. To do so, I looked at what and who was not selected for inclusion in the brochures and what types of educations and experiences were invalidated in WKU’s version of an international setting. I particularly focused on whether aspects related to Chinese/local knowledge, curriculum, experiences, and faculty were discussed in the promotion of WKU and its graduates. Seeing what was absent allowed me to unpack what WKU excludes from its definition of “world-class education,” “internationalization,” and “proud graduates,” as well as question the hegemonic and colonial assumptions underlying Western supremacy.

Finally, I used the three pathways of Whiteness as futurity as a guide to discuss how notions of colonialism and orientalism are embedded in the discourses of internationalization and world-class education in these five documents. I specifically looked at how the discourses of internationalization and world-class education in these documents align with the tenets of Whiteness as futurity and positioned Western HE, students at IBCs, and international experiences as superior to Chinese HE, students in non-Western universities, and local experiences.

This analysis focused on the following three research questions:
How do the branding materials of WKU define internationalization and world-class education?

How does WKU’s representation of “proud graduates” in its branding materials implicate or not the three pathways of Whiteness as futurity and colonialism?

To what extent is Chinese education or local knowledge and experience acknowledged or ignored in WKU’s branding materials?

Findings

University Brochure

The University Brochure (2017) is one of the university’s most important branding publications because it concisely represents the core values WKU present to the public, especially prospective students and their parents. Drawing on colonial discourse analysis, I found WKU primarily defines and advertises “world-class education” and “international education” by Western educational resources, Western-style teaching and learning (including faculty and textbooks), English learning environments, and White credentials (University Brochure, 2017). Importantly, I also found the courses WKU offers at their Chinese Curricula Center, such as Chinese culture and history (i.e., required courses for Mainland Chinese students), are missing from its primary branding materials (Chinese Curricula Center, n.d.). As for visual representations, although WKU suggests “100% of the faculty are recruited globally” (Wenzhou-Kean University, n.d.), most of the images depict White faculty teaching Chinese students, while representations of non-White faculty remained notably absent (University Brochure, 2017).

“World-class education” is the main theme of the University Brochure. On the first page, the term is used to describe WKU’s educational offerings. The sentence “a city of the world, a university of the future” appears on the second page, representing the city of Wenzhou as an international city and WKU as an international university leading Chinese and global HE into the future (University Brochure, 2017). The brochure suggests that the main reason WKU brands itself as a provider of world-class education is because it offers Chinese students the opportunity to access US HE without having to leave China: “[WKU] brings advanced educational resources from the U.S. and implements American-style educational methodology in an all-English teaching environment to provide students with access to world-class education right here in China” (University Brochure, 2017, p. 3). WKU additionally positions itself as a bridge for Chinese students to get US credentials and study in the West. For instance, the brochure indicates students can obtain bachelor’s degrees from both WKU and Kean University and that they can attend exchange and graduate programs at Kean University.

Proud graduates

My analysis of the proud graduates brochures centered on examining who WKU defined as “proud graduates” and what work they had done during college that the university considered international, as well as who and what types of experiences were excluded. I found these brochures highlighted certain criteria of proud graduates—i.e., graduate school application results, overseas experiences, internship and research experiences, and English
skills. In the following sections, I show how these criteria align with the school’s definition of world-class education in the University Brochure.

**Graduate school admissions**

First and foremost, graduates admitted to top-ranked universities are who WKU primarily represents as “proud graduates.” Among the 43 “proud graduates” featured in the brochures and according to the descriptions in the brochures, only eight decided not to pursue a graduate degree right after graduation, but some did note they planned to apply to graduate schools in the future (Proud, 2018, 2019; Proud, 2020; Proud, 2021). The other 35 “proud graduates” were admitted to top-ranked universities in the USA, the U.K., Australia, Hong Kong, and other IBCs in China (Proud, 2018, 2019; Proud, 2020; Proud, 2021).

Analysis revealed an extensive use of GURs to describe the universities and programs the proud graduates were admitted to. See the list below for some examples:

- “According to [the US] News Ranking, the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education is ranked the second in the US, only behind the Harvard University Graduate School of Education” (Proud, 2019, p. 4).
- “Parsons School of Design is the largest art and design school across America, and it is among the top four schools of design in the world” (Proud, 2019, p. 10).
- “a senior student … received an admission letter from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In the US News Education rankings, Harvard Graduate School of Education has repeatedly ranked first in the world” (Proud, 2020, p. 3).
- “… has received offers from University of College London (UCL) (ranked 10th in QS) and the University of Southern California (ranked 22nd in the US by the US NEWS)” (Proud, 2021, p. 3).
- “He has already received offers from Northwestern University (ranked 9th in the US by US NEWS) and the London School of Economics and Political Science (ranked 2nd in QS Social Sciences and Management)” (Proud, 2021, p. 4).

Although WKU’s home institution, Kean University, is not a top-ranked university in the USA, having graduates admitted to highly ranked universities, particularly in the West, was an important, recurring indicator WKU used to evaluate the success of its curriculum. As the list above demonstrates, the university relies heavily on describing “proud graduates” in terms of university rankings, such as GURs and subject rankings. Indeed, all the universities these graduates were admitted to are top ranked, but it is worth noting that the brochures did not use a consistent global university ranking. Rather, the rankings indicating the universities performed well were selectively chosen to depict the school’s graduates’ achievements according to Western standards of education. Moreover, given the brochures adopted GURs to evaluate the graduates’ accomplishments and that WKU itself is a Sino-US cooperative university, students intending to study at US institutions were predominantly featured among the university’s proud graduates.

**Overseas experiences**

Overseas experiences, including exchange semesters at Kean University in the USA, volunteering abroad, and attending international conferences and activities, were highly valued
in the proud graduates brochures (Proud, 2018, 2019; Proud, 2020; Proud, 2021). Among
the graduates from the featured classes (i.e., Classes 2018 to 2021), many participated
in non-academic international conferences to broaden their horizons and gain leadership
skills. These activities predominantly took place in foreign countries and are fee-paying
programs. For instance, one student participated as a representative in the “6th University
Scholars Leadership Symposium in Hong Kong” (Proud, 2018, p. 4); another student had
“a practice opportunity in the United Nations international Maritime Organization in Lon-
don” (Proud, 2019, p. 19); another student had an “APEC experience [which] allow[ed] her
not only to make many new friends, but also to increase her knowledge and broaden her
horizons” (Proud, 2019, p. 19); and one student “participated in the 24th United Nations
Climate Change Conference as an NGO observer, and took part in the press conference of
her NGO as a Chinese youth representative” (Proud, 2020 p. 8).

Volunteer experiences outside China were also a key feature of the proud graduates. Some
went to economically developed nations to experience cultural exchange, like the
student who “spent two months in South Korea volunteer teaching” (Proud, 2018, p. 4) and
another who “spent 48 hours on a work exchange” in Australia (Proud, 2018, p. 12). Oth-
ers went to less economically developed countries to spread “world-class education” in the
form of English language and Western teaching. For instance, one student “went to Thai-
land to support the local education, and her job was to teach local children English, and
help these children broaden their horizons of the world” (Proud, 2019, p. 8), while others
went to Indonesia and Sri Lanka to provide other types of “educational aid” (Proud, 2020,
pp. 5–6).

Participation in an exchange semester at Kean University in the USA was another major
feature of WKU’s proud graduates. WKU represented these exchange experiences as
highly appreciated by graduates, who noted studying at Kean provided them with opportu-
nities to “[meet] enthusiastic and friendly Americans, enjoyed a comfortable life, and expe-
rienced the world’s top education resources” (Proud, 2018, p. 5). WKU also included that
some students liked the experience so much that they took courses that would not satisfy
WKU’s minor requirements (Proud, 2018, p. 7).

WKU’s representations of their proud graduates also emphasized overseas experiences
as significant assets for applying to graduate schools. The university implicated these
experiences would enrich students’ resumes and facilitate their successful admission into
top-ranked graduate schools. Nevertheless, the costliness of the overseas programs margin-
alized students without the funds to participate in these programs. Only those who volun-
teered in China and attended local activities were thus likely to be excluded from the proud
graduates designation.

**Internship and research**

Professionally, WKU’s proud graduates actively participated in internships, such that some
had a variety of internship experiences and publications. For instance, one student “started
doing internships during the winter and summer holidays of her first year, and her resume
includes 4 separate internships” (Proud, 2018, p. 9). Similarly, a business graduate “worked
as an intern in the loan departments of both ICBC (Industrial and Commercial Bank of
China) and BEA (Bank of East Asia).”

Academically, many of the graduates participated in research activities with faculty
members. Some presented their work at academic conferences and published papers in
international journals. For instance, one student “has three publications … and she is
determined to be a Ph.D. in the future” Proud, 2018, p. 6). In addition, some students worked with faculty on research projects and “brought their research achievement to Kansas City to participate in the IEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers) conference,” Proud, 2018, p. 6). Another student “actively participated in scientific research and academic exchanges. His research result has not only been displayed on the exhibition platform of WKU Student Research Day but also in the IBSS conference held at Waseda University” Proud, 2019, p. 6). One of the graduates even “published four papers at international conferences” and believed his research output to be “the key to his final success” Proud, 2020, p. 7).

Like the overseas experiences in the previous section, most of the graduates’ internship and research experiences in the brochures were selected because they are, to some extent, considered “international.” One student explained engaging in research activities such as presenting at international conferences and publishing on English journals was key to his final success and a main reason why they participated in research and internship is for applying to top-ranked graduate schools. Featured experiences like these show how WKU sees itself preparing students for the capacity required to attend top-ranked graduate schools in the West. This heavy focus on graduate schools’ admission criteria, interning at foreign companies, attending academic conferences abroad, and publishing in English journals, is presented as a valid professional and academic experience WKU’s branding materials, while local internships and research activities are excluded from qualifying as “proud.”

English skills

English skills are especially important in IBCs, where English is the medium of instruction. WKU’s brochures presented many proud graduates’ experiences learning English and becoming fluent second-language speakers. For instance, one student was described as successful in terms of the English skills he gained: “immersing himself in this English environment every day, his English has been greatly improved to the point that he scored 7.5 on IELTS” Proud, 2019, p. 8). Similarly, to improve their English, another student “chose one of the most [tough] English teachers in her freshman year to force herself to strengthen her English” Proud, 2019, p. 8). WKU’s representations of the importance of English in their brochures align with a larger trend in IBCs that equates speaking fluent English with more opportunities. This sentiment holds that English proficiency helps students get good grades in class, obtain career opportunities, and facilitate graduate school applications. For example, a student who became an IELTS teacher was chosen to speak at WKU’s commencement as a prime example of an outstanding graduate Proud, 2018, p. 12).

In sum, although the proud graduates featured in these brochures graduated in different years and although WKU states the institution is dedicated to the principle of “providing students with different ways of development” (Wenzhou-Kean University, n.d.), the graduates and WKU’s “different” ways of development are actually quite similar. For instance, the school presents such methods of development as admission to top-ranked graduate schools, active participation in internships and research, overseas experiences (e.g., exchange and volunteer programs), and speaking fluent English. In the following section, I engage in further analysis of how these merits, alongside the features of WKU’s definition of a “world-class education,” adhere to the three pathways of Whiteness as futurity.
Discussions

Whiteness as aspiration

Recall that Whiteness as aspiration has been defined as the manipulation of global imaginaries regarding what counts as the future of HE and what others (i.e., non-White, non-Westerners) should aspire to (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2021). I argue that WKU exhibits this form of colonial discourse in its definition of “world-class education,” which primarily refers to Western education models and excludes the university’s course offerings at its Chinese Curricula Center. WKU’s branding materials thereby elevate Western knowledge as “advanced” in relation to other knowledges and something others (i.e., non-White, non-Westerners) should aspire to if they want to be successful. By positioning Western knowledge and Western IBCs as world-class and advanced, these materials simultaneously suggest other universities, knowledges, and languages are not sources of world-class education and are therefore inferior.

Evaluating and equating world-class education as equal to Western education is a manifestation of Whiteness as aspiration. This is apparent in how IBC educations are usually dominated by Western epistemologies taught by English and international faculty, as well as in how the language in IBCs’ branding materials often describe Western knowledge, foreign faculty, and the English language as things students in non-White, non-Western contexts should aspire to. Whiteness as aspiration is also apparent in the depictions of speaking fluent English, acquiring Western knowledge, and holding white credentials as the universal qualifications for success in the global labor market. Yet, this phenomenon is not only limited to IBCs; to promote “internationalization,” many non-IBC Chinese universities have begun offering bilingual courses in English (Zha et al., 2019), importing Western curricula, and recruiting international faculty (Lin, 2019).

Not only does Whiteness as aspiration invalidate Chinese knowledge, it also invalidates Chinese people and culture. In WKU’s signing ceremony, a leader of the Zhejiang Province claimed, “Wenzhou people are wealthy in material but in need of educational opportunities; especially higher education is less developed in Wenzhou compared to other cities in Zhejiang Province. But you [Kean University] just come in time and provide the education that Wenzhou people have been longing for” (University Brochure, 2017, p. 4). This quote suggests that, although the Wenzhou people are wealthy, they are undereducated by the Western-driven standards of internationalization. Positioning Wenzhou people as such, regardless of whether there is truth in it or not, justifies the establishment of WKU and cements its necessity in providing Wenzhou people with advanced educational aid from the West. This claim indicates a “hierarchy of knowledge” (Jain, 2013), as it purports that those who seek formal, colonial educations are considered educated, while those who seek non-Western educations are not as educated.

Interestingly, Wenzhou is well-known for being “a regional center of global capitalism” because of “the rapid growth of many small and medium-sized family-owned manufacturing enterprises” (Cao, 2008, p. 63). The region’s success has been encapsulated in what is known as the Wenzhou model of economic development (Parris, 2017). Yet, by Western standards, Wenzhou’s economic success is not valid because its methods are not taught at formal, Westernized institutions. In this way, Western education can be seen as colonizing what counts as quality education as well as who is considered well-educated and why.
WKU also deploys Whiteness as aspiration by defining internationalization in terms of language proficiency and foregrounding students who strive to speak fluent English and enter top-ranked graduate schools in Western nations. For instance, WKU graduates are regularly admitted to Chinese graduate schools and choose to work for local companies or government. Excluding them from the university’s definition of proud graduates seems to suggest they are less impressive, less successful, and less educated because they have not prioritized the speaking of fluent English and have not been admitted to a top-ranked university in the West.

**Whiteness as investment**

Recall that Whiteness as investment is a result of Whiteness as aspiration in that it compels non-White nations to invest in Whiteness to gain social and material benefits (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2021). Thus, by virtue of the existence of Whiteness as aspiration in WKU’s branding materials, Whiteness as investment is also present. This is especially apparent in the cost of IBCs, which are much higher than local Chinese universities. According to the latest *Wenzhou-Kean University Undergraduate Recruitment Information* (2021), WKU’s tuition fee is 65,000 Chinese yuan yearly, which is about 10 times higher than other Chinese universities. However, WKU’s tuition is lower compared to the tuitions of other IBCs; for instance, the University of Nottingham Ningbo China charges 100,000 Chinese yuan yearly (Tuition fees and finance, n.d.), NYU Shanghai charges 200,000 yuan for first- and second-year students (Cost of Attendance, n.d.), and Duke Kunshan University charges 200,000 Chinese yuan yearly (Tuition and Cost of Attendance, n.d.). In addition, other fees at IBCs (e.g., foreign textbooks and housing) are also much higher than other Chinese universities. Such high costs reinforce the belief that attending IBCs is an educational investment for some Chinese families, which in turn reinforces investment in Whiteness to achieve success in the global labor market.

As China has the largest population in the world, the massification of HE in China has in turn made China the largest HE system in the world. However, importantly, this system does not serve the masses, especially IBCs, which are known for being exclusive (Shan & Guo, 2014). The small scope of IBCs in China, the requirement of English language proficiency, and high tuition fees ensure these institutions can only serve students from the upper-middle class and beyond. They are extremely exclusive and thereby considered as “elite” education that only upper-middle- and upper-class families can afford.

Being taught Western curricula in English by foreign faculty in Western IBCs can be a great investment for many Chinese students. Through Whiteness as aspiration, Western institutions have colonized the global market and education, meaning those who possess Western credentials often have an easier time entering international companies and top-ranked graduate schools in the West because they are likely fluent in English, come with recommendations by foreign faculty, have US transcripts that do not need to be translated and coursework that complies Western standards. These factors help them stand out among their Chinese peers in Chinese universities who have not made such investments in Whiteness.

Given this, I contend that the proud graduates in WKU’s brochures also see their attendance of WKU as an investment that makes Whiteness and its privileges reachable. Many acknowledged WKU’s role in helping them successfully submit graduate
school applications and pursue competitive careers. For instance, a proud graduate from the Class 2019 said, “I benefited enormously from the American-style interactive environment and active classroom participation, which forced me to step out of my comfort zone and enhanced my English communication skills” (Proud, 2019, p. 19). Another from the Class 2020 mentioned, “faculty here at WKU was international, and the curriculum was international, as well as the instruction. At WKU, the small-size classroom, all-English teaching environment, group cooperation, and other teaching methods are a great benefit to his study” (Proud, 2020, p. 4). Coupled with WKU’s definition of a world class education, these testimonies show that, although students at WKU pay much higher tuition fees compared to those in local Chinese universities, many see this investment (i.e., an investment in Whiteness) as worthwhile because they equate it with a greater chance of finding success in a global society colonized by Whiteness as futurity.

**Whiteness as malleability**

Finally, recall that Whiteness as malleability has been defined as a mode of thought that holds Whiteness and its privileges are reachable. It manifests in Chinese students’ assumptions in that, by attending IBCs, they do not need to attend Western institutions in person to obtain White credentials. My analyses of WKU’s branding material shows the school sells students a degree they can obtain in the comfort of their home countries that they feel equates to a Kean University degree in the USA. In other words, they feel a degree like this from a US institution of HE can facilitate their graduate school applications and privilege their educational background. In this way, IBCs in China are seen as vehicles for people from upper-middle- to upper-class families to join the game of Whiteness as futurity, which further perpetuates the devaluation of Chinese educations while elevating the value of Western educations in Chinese and global HE landscapes.

It is important to note here that the WKU branding materials portrayed its graduates as recognizing the significant role of the university in helping find successful in graduate school applications and job hunting. What is absent from these accounts, however, is an acknowledgement of the privileged backgrounds that enable them and their families to support their investments in Whiteness and its privileges. The resources provided at WKU (e.g., English teaching environments, Western curricula, global faculty, and White credentials) that have helped them get into Western nations to study are one factor, but another is their families’ capital. This capital is what allows them to pursue expensive master’s degrees in the West and participate in international activities outside of China. It is no mistake that these are the kinds of families and students WKU values and targets for recruitment, while students who do not possess such capital are relatively marginalized by the institution. The lack of such capital hinders these students’ abilities to achieve Whiteness and its attendant privileges, and leaves them underrepresented in their institution and after graduation.

Overall, even though IBCs in China grant degrees that are ostensibly equivalent to those of the IBCs’ home institutions, there is still a colonial hierarchy at work in the global education market that ranks Western degrees as “superior” to all others, even Western IBCs. Thus, without transforming the White credentials from IBCs to Western institutions in Western nations, degrees from IBCs are not necessarily as competitive as credentials obtained directly from the West. It is a combination of credentials from Western IBCs and family capital that ultimately makes Whiteness reachable for certain IBC graduates.
Conclusions

Summary of findings

In this paper, I analyzed Western IBCs in China via an investigation into how the Wenzhou-Kean University (WKU) international branch campus defines its provision of “world-class education” and “international education” in terms of Whiteness as futurity. Using an anticolonial lens, I examined WKU’s online branding materials and found WKU defines a “world-class education” as the importing of educational resources from the West for teaching Western curricula and knowledge in non-Western nations. Such teaching employs English as the medium of instruction, relies largely on foreign faculty, and grants Western credentials. WKU thus defines academic excellence in this regard by those who were admitted to top-ranked graduate schools, those who actively participated in overseas programs, and those who speak fluent English.

Overall, the present study illuminates how Whiteness is reproduced by a particular IBC in China whose home institution in the West and is not top ranked. By depicting Western education as world-class, WKU suggests Western universities are, by nature, superior to local Chinese universities, regardless of GURs. Obtaining Western credentials though IBCs can thus “Whiten” Chinese students by giving them access to more privileges in a global knowledge economy dominated by Western ideals. However, the recent COVID-19 pandemic, travel restrictions, and mounting tensions between the USA and China have posed significant challenges to IBCs in China, particularly cooperative Sino-US institutions. Nevertheless, given the durability of the Whiteness as futurity imaginary and the ongoing assumption that IBCs serve as agencies that make Whiteness reachable for non-White non-Westerners, it is likely IBCs will continue to be welcomed by students and parents in non-White nations, non-Western.

Critiques and implications

In this section, I engaged critiques of internationalization, global citizenship, and GURs, to explore implications for future practice and ways for reimagining Western IBCs in China and beyond. First, many characteristics of world-class education and internationalization depicted by IBCs have already been criticized. Knight (2014), for instance, has argued internationalization should build on and respect local contexts. However, in many IBCs including WKU, local contexts are often subjugated to the dominance of Western modes of thought. An example of this is the exclusive use of Western textbooks and the prioritization of hiring foreign faculty. De Wit (2011) has also pointed out that “Internationalisation is teaching in the English language” and “Internationalisation is studying abroad” (2014) as two of the most common misconceptions of internationalization. Yet, as evidenced in this study, these misconceptions continue to be extensively represented features of IBCs.

WKU has further identified overseas experiences, especially overseas volunteer programs through which students teach English in economically underdeveloped countries, as examples of WKU graduates as global citizens. However, these programs operate on the assumption that China and other global south nations require benevolent educational aid from the West and that economically underdeveloped countries need Western-trained “global citizens” to provide their benevolent educational aid to nations in the Global South (Jefferess, 2008). Programs aimed for helping “unfortunate Others” do
not necessarily help the people of these regions and in many cases inflict and perpetuate harm. WKU’s representation of ideal graduates is based on its student participation in such activities, which reproduce problematic colonial imaginaries and often inflict harm on non-White, non-Western subjects.

Moreover, my analysis in this paper demonstrates that IBCs use GURs as measures to evaluate their graduates, but GURs are not neutral and are arguably problematic. Stack (2016, 2020), for instance, has suggested improving GURs does not improve equity and inclusion. Rather, GURs are seen as a way of incentivizing competition among institutions via the “geopolitics of knowledge” that “naturalize inequality as necessary for the development of society and human knowledge” (Stack & Mazawi, 2021, p. 226). Shahjahan and Edwards (2021) have additionally argued that GURs privilege White Western institutions and orient universities around the globe to conform to the norms of predominantly White institutions. Although IBCs do not participate in GURs themselves, they compete with one another to admit the most graduates to top-ranked graduate schools. The more graduates are admitted to top-ranked universities, especially those in the West, the more successful the IBC. In this sense, IBCs have become agencies and gatekeepers for reproducing top-ranked universities and the imaginaries that center GURs as a primary way of measuring academic excellence in non-Western contexts.

Based on the results of this study, it is highly recommended that IBCs reconsider their role in perpetuating colonial conceptions of internationalization and move beyond mimicking and elevating the supremacy of Western institutions. IBCs might instead propose curricula that equitably fuse Chinese and Western epistemologies without elevating one over the other. This study also illuminated how Western educational practices can potentially harm non-White subjects. To denaturalize the colonial assumptions embedded in global HE, it is therefore necessary for IBCs to value and equitably incorporate Indigenous and local knowledges if they are to truly engage students to reimagining what world-class education and global talents can look like.

Limitations and future research

This study has certain limitations in its design that should be carefully considered in future scholarship. As a case study that exclusively examined web-based branding materials, some findings of this study might not be generalizable to other IBCs, particularly those outside of China. If possible, future studies exploring IBCs and internationalization should consider interviewing stakeholders at IBCs in addition to discursively analyzing university webpages, social media pages, and visual elements on campuses. Since neocolonialism is embedded in Western HE and the discourses of internationalization that uphold the supremacy of Western HE, researchers studying IBCs might follow Suspsitsyna’s (2021) suggestion of applying approaches that decenter Whiteness and promote more equitable, inclusive futures for global HE and how IBCs can contribute to this process.

Declarations

Conflict of interest  The author declares there is no conflict of interest.
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