The China-centric era? Rethinking academic identity for sustainable higher education internationalization in China

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Abstract
Although recent decades have witnessed remarkable development of China’s higher education (HE) since its Open Door policy in 1978, China’s cross-border collaboration in HE has not always been smooth. The global rise of neo-nationalism in recent years, exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, has put international academic collaboration under grave threat. This conceptual article first conducts a critical review of China’s strategy for HE internationalization to discern its underlying rationale and what is encumbering the process. By examining the concept of academic identity through the lens of academic nationalism and academic internationalism in Chinese HE context, it is argued that the crux of China’s cross-border collaboration issue may largely lie in the imbalanced nationalist and internationalist dimensions of Chinese academic identity. The article has implications for Chinese academics to balance their identities for better global collaboration and sustainable HE internationalization amid geopolitical tensions in an era of flux.

Keywords
academic identity, higher education internationalization, Chinese academics, global collaboration, China
Introduction

It is a tough time for international academic collaboration amid geopolitical tensions in an era of flux. The geopolitical relations between China and other countries, especially the United States, deteriorated at an alarming rate as a result of, but not limited to, the COVID-19 pandemic. Although having boosted economic development worldwide, globalization brought growing economic inequality, xenophobia, and neo-nationalism among those negatively affected (Altbach & de Wit, 2017). These side effects became globally evident and even turned to a backlash against globalization in recent years—from the advance of Brexit in the United Kingdom to the escalating US–China “new cold war” in almost all aspects including trade, technology, and diplomacy during Trump’s presidency.

The tensions between Washington and Beijing have directly and indirectly affected global HE. At the moment, the black swan event of COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the existing challenges of globalization on HE worldwide. While emerging discussions and studies on the impacts of COVID-19 on HE have mostly focused on international student and scholar mobility and online learning, the growing threat of neo-nationalism to international academic collaboration is worth noting (DeLaquil, 2020). For example, fear of “national security” or “espionage” among Chinese students, scholars, and programs has been exaggerated by the Trump administration in the US HE, which culminated in the arrest of a series of Chinese visiting scholars with military affiliations and the closure of Chinese consulate in Houston (O’Keeffe & Viswanatha, 2020). Despite the US–China geopolitical tensions, the research collaboration between the two countries has in fact been growing during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee & Haupt, 2020). In other words, it suggests that the academic community follows their own agenda for scientific cooperation instead of the political agenda. However, the geopolitical tensions tend to continue, as a broad consensus on concerns over intellectual property theft and academic freedom in China has been reached in the US government (Altbach & de Wit, 2020).

The global rise of China is one of the most important geopolitical trends in the 21st century. And like major geopolitical trends in history, China’s rise is presumed to either strengthen or weaken international collaboration in HE (van der Wende, 2018). The launch of Open Door policy in 1978 not only enabled China to achieve phenomenal economic growth but also radically drove the internationalization of HE in China. China’s quest for world-class universities (WCUs) has been drawing increasing attention of the world since the 1990s. After entering the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, China sought to exert soft power in HE through centralized approaches including Confucius Institutes (Yang, 2007) and the recent Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative (Belt and Road Portal, 2017). However, considerable anxiety with respect to these ambitious endeavors such as the termination of partnerships with Confucius Institutes and rising skepticism about China–Africa academic collaboration also surfaced in many parts of the world (e.g. Eduan & Jiang, 2019; Myklebust, 2020). What is encumbering China’s HE internationalization, especially cross-border collaboration in HE?

According to DeLaquil (2020), academic identity as citizens of an international HE system is under threat by the rising neo-nationalism, leading to the breakdown of international academic collaboration. Albeit the viewpoint is largely from the West and nationalism has different meanings and manifestations across the globe (Douglass, 2017), it raised the critical concept of academic identity that is poorly understood in HE (Drennan et al., 2020). However, the growing interests in academic identity research have largely focused on the impact of neo-liberalism, blurring disciplinary boundaries, and academic casualization on academic identity formation in Western HE contexts (Barrow et al., 2020). It is also noted that the national context plays a significant role in shaping and reshaping academic identity under changing circumstances (Anikina et al., 2020). Hence, an in-depth understanding of how the global rise of neo-nationalism
affects academic identity in Chinese HE context will not only advance the conversation on academic identity construction but also contribute to unraveling China’s own challenges of cross-border collaboration during its HE internationalization in troubled times. But how do we—both Chinese and international community—understand the identity (re)construction of Chinese academics? What kind of impacts does nationalism have on (re)shaping the identity of Chinese academics?

Guided by these important research questions that are likely to influence the functioning of the HE system and future global collaboration, the article first revisits China’s strategy for HE internationalization to discern the underlying rationale and what the challenges are in this process. To answer the research questions as to identity formation among Chinese academics influenced by nationalism, the concept of academic identity is examined through the lens of academic nationalism and academic internationalism in Chinese HE context. Based on the analytical review of the literature, it is argued that the crux of China’s cross-border collaboration in HE may largely lie in the imbalanced nationalist and internationalist dimensions of Chinese academic identity. The article has implications for Chinese academics to balance their identities to better engage and collaborate with the international academic community and for sustainable HE internationalization amid geopolitical tensions in an era of flux.

A critical review of China’s strategy for HE internationalization

HE development in modern China was never a smooth path. Influences from colonial powers including Germany, France, the UK, the US, and Japan could be seen in Imperial China. In the 1950s, Soviet university model quickly replaced the Western model once the People’s Republic of China was founded. After the Sino-Soviet split, China attempted to pursue an independent and distinctive approach to developing HE. However, these attempts proved futile and were followed by the Great Leap Forward and the massive disruptions of Cultural Revolution in the 1960—1970s (Altbach, 1989; Hayhoe, 1996). At the same time, the vast national debts were undermining the national sovereignty of many Western European countries that followed Keynesian economics by adopting big government (Peters & Chiang, 2020). The political crisis assisted the resurgence of liberal internationalism to promote free trade globalization in the 1970s. The paradigm shift, known as neo-liberalism, gained a legitimate status as Hayek and Friedman were awarded the Nobel Prize in 1974 and 1976, respectively. It was then strongly exported by President Reagan to the international community in the 1980s (Peters & Chiang, 2020).

The launch of Open Door policy in 1978 made China, consciously and unconsciously, converge into the tidal wave of globalization. To cultivate and supply the much-needed professionals in its nation-building, Deng Xiaoping undertook the task of restoring the destructed education system after the decade-long Cultural Revolution in late 1976. Two years later, China opened its doors to foreign investment and loans, foreign participation in economic enterprises, and the purchase of foreign technology and machinery (Yang, 2012), and has achieved phenomenal economic growth since then. Alongside economic development, China again turned to the West for ideas about HE development. Economic globalization considerably drove the internationalization of HE in China.

Marginson (Hayhoe et al., 2014) stresses that China has to integrate with the world prior to demonstrating global leadership and influence in all aspects in the long run. Since the late 1970s, HE internationalization was first used as an instrument to accelerate the realization of “the four modernizations”—industry, agriculture, defense, science and technology (Yang, 2014). Then, China started to play with international conventions in the 1980s. For example, China signed Mutual Recognition Agreements on academic qualifications to gain international recognition of the qualifications awarded by its HE institutions (Pan, 2013). In the late 1990s, China embarked on
its quest for WCU through the implementation of “Project 211” and “Project 985,” which were replaced by the “Double First-class” Initiative in 2015 (Peters & Besley, 2018). Furthermore, the remarkable performance of HE in China even provoked lively discussions on the emergence of a “Chinese Model” of the university (e.g., Li, 2012; Marginson, 2011; Zha, 2011).

Once entering the WTO in 2001, China followed the General Agreement on Trade in Services to open its HE market and cooperated with world-renowned universities to improve its international HE quality through establishing joint academic programs and ventures at home (Pan, 2013), such as The University of Nottingham Ningbo China and New York University Shanghai. On the other hand, China consciously reached out to increase its educational, cultural, and diplomatic influences globally through state-led initiatives such as the Confucius Institutes and the Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative. In addition, Chinese universities have already established offshore campuses along the Belt and Road, for instance, Lao Soochow University and Xiamen University, Malaysia. While these cross-border initiatives largely promoted international exchange and cooperation in HE, Yang (2007, 2014) argues that internationalization of HE was used as a strategy to project China’s soft power for creating a favorable paradigm of globalization. More recently, the proposition by China’s President Xi Jinping for building “a community of shared future for all humankind” (Xinhua Net, 2017) resonates with the internationalization goal of “education for global citizenship” (Ng, 2012), that is, to promote international collaboration to address the global challenges together for sustainable development in an increasingly interdependent world.

As we have seen, internationalization of HE needs to meet a wide array of needs at the national level in China. To discern the differing rationales underpinning China’s strategy for HE internationalization at different stages, Zheng and Kapoor (2020) adopted the theories and concepts of state formation and classified China’s policy shifts regarding the internationalization of HE between 1949 and 2019 into three periods:

- Early engagement period (1949–1976), characterized by Marxist–Leninist Socialist nationalism, patriotism, and proletarian internationalism
- Further engagement period (1977–2002), signaled by China’s return to the world stage and boosted by neo-liberal globalization
- Global engagement period (2003–2019), driven by state developmentalism and featured by state nationalism and Confucianism

As for the present global engagement period, Zheng and Kapoor (2020) argue that Confucianism and state nationalism were strategically reintroduced and reinforced by the central government in the name of realizing “the Chinese Dream” of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in the 21st century. In contrast, Wu (2019) explicates that China is using “outward-oriented” HE internationalization strategy as an instrument to advance China’s HE systems from the “periphery” toward the “core,” expand global influence, and hopefully, promote HE-based civilizational dialog through Confucianism.

Meanwhile, the ambitious strategy for China’s HE internationalization appears to unsettle the international community regarding cross-border collaboration with China to varying degrees. For instance, concerns over the Confucius Institutes for an infusion of propaganda and a lack of academic freedom regarding teaching and curriculum have led to the termination of partnerships with a bunch of HE institutions worldwide (Myklebust, 2020). Research grants and funding from Huawei were banned by UC Berkeley after the University of Oxford for security concerns, so were the research collaboration with the Chinese telecom giant (Gibney, 2019). Despite progressive growth in terms of China–Africa research collaboration, China’s approach is filled with rising skepticism as to China’s real intention for academic collaboration (Eduan & Jiang, 2019), besides
China’s Belt and Road Initiative being criticized as neo-colonialism (Etzioni, 2020). These
tensions and challenges beg the question, then, what is encumbering China’s HE international-
ization, especially cross-border collaboration in HE?

**Conceptual framework**

The breakdown of international academic collaboration against the backdrop of the global rise
of China and neo-nationalism intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic deserves close ex-
amination. DeLaquil (2020) calls urgent attention to the increasing threat posed by populist
nationalism to our identities as citizens of an international academic community. While her
stance is largely from the West, it raised a critical concept of academic identity that is per-
plexing in HE (Drennan et al., 2020). It is also noted that new nationalism comes in varied
forms in different parts of the world, be it a grassroots movement driven by populism in the US
and Europe or a tool utilized by the power elites to influence and shape popular sentiment in
China and Russia (Douglass, 2017). As seen previously, China is striving to integrate with the
international community and rushing to transform its HE role from a follower to a global
leader. However, how Chinese academics continue to engage and co-create global dialogs and
contribute to world knowledge systems remains unclear. An investigation of the Chinese
academic identity may allow us to discern the issue of China’s cross-border collaboration in
HE from within, which is likely to impact the functioning of the HE system and the future of
global collaboration. But how do we understand the identity (re)construction of Chinese
academics? What kind of impacts does nationalism have on (re)shaping the identity of Chinese
academics?

To answer these important research questions, we first need a definition of academic identity.
Recognizing the contextual influence on the formation of an academic identity in HE, Billot
(2010, p. 4) defined it as “(a) dynamic construct, as one’s individual identity emerges from a
personal, ethnic and national context, but it is also socially constructed over time.” Several core
notions pertaining to the exploration of academic identity encompass “collegiality, academic
freedom, autonomy, professional self-regulation, values, and behavioral patterns” (Clegg, 2008;
Winter 2009; as cited in Drennan et al., 2020, p. 35). In addition, the lens of academic nationalism
and academic internationalism is employed to examine the core notions of academic identity in
Chinese HE context. According to Nelson (2013), the identity of modern scholars is both
cosmopolitan and citizen, that is, academics are ideally disinterested scholars serving the interests
of all humanity as well as national citizens serving the interests of the state. Thus, academics need
to delicately balance between the “ideals of internationalism” and the “constraints of nationalism”
(Nelson, 2013, p. 94).

Drawing on Billot’s (2010) definition of academic identity as socially constructed over time,
the research assumes the theoretical stance of social constructionism. This theoretical foun-
dation highlights the social nature of knowledge and understands academic identity as his-
torically and culturally contingent rather than as essential (Barrow et al., 2020). Additionally, as
academic collaboration can be perceived as a crucial part of the social learning process, it seems
helpful to apply the socialization theory to explain the identity (re)construction of Chinese
academics as they integrate with the international academic community. Through the social-
ization process, Chinese academics learn from their overseas collaborators to acquire the
knowledge and skills and adopt the values, attitudes, beliefs, and norms of the community to
which they strive to belong (Baker & Lattuca, 2010; Jung et al., 2021; Tierney, 1997). With a
particular focus on the changing relations between scholarship and the state, the conceptual
framework is expected to yield insights into analyzing the construct of academic identity
influenced by (inter)nationalism over time.
Academic identity in Chinese HE context

As pointed out by Wu (2019), whether China’s rise in HE will bring new conflicts to the world relies on how the rise is seen by not only China but also the international community. Based on the foregoing conceptual framework, the following analysis aims to disentangle the complex concept of academic identity through the lens of academic nationalism and academic internationalism. Aside from ideological issues, current discussions on China’s cross-border collaboration often point to a clash of academic values between China and the West (van der Wende, 2018). Core notions including academic freedom, autonomy, and behavioral patterns closely related to academic identity are examined in the national context of China. As Anderson (2006) contends that the large cultural context cannot be neglected to understand nationalism, the significant role of Chinese traditional culture in constructing and shaping the academic identity of Chinese intellectuals and scholars today are also discussed.

The inherent and dominant academic nationalism

In parallel with China’s developmental model, Chinese universities have always been featured by the dominant state control compared to their Western counterparts (Zha & Hayhoe, 2014). While Yang (2014) maintains that modern universities are foreign transplants to China, Chinese higher learning has a long history. The ethos of Chinese scholarship has mostly been shaped by its cumulative intellectual tradition over centuries (Hayhoe & Liu, 2011). Hence, a brief look at the history of Chinese higher learning would be helpful to understand its influence on Chinese academics in the contemporary world.

According to Hayhoe (1996), the imperial civil service examination system or *keju* (科舉) and the academies or *shuyuan* (書院) are two core elements of Chinese higher learning in ancient times. And they enjoyed radical intellectual freedom and fragile local autonomy in certain periods. The officialdom-centered style of administration had developed with the *keju*, when people held and amplified the belief that “a good scholar would make an official” (學而優則仕). Neither the *shuyuan* nor the institutions for the *keju* including *hanlinyuan* (翰林院), *guozijian* (國子監), and *taixue* (太學) were characterized by the kind of autonomy enjoyed by the universities in Europe (Hayhoe, 1996). In addition, the Confucian knowledge tradition has long encouraged scholars to seek a unity of knowledge and action (Zha, 2010), that is, using knowledge to change the society instead of seeking the ontological significance of knowledge, through the roles of scholar-officials since Han Dynasty (202 BCE—220 CE; Hawkins & Lee, 2020).

As a result of the cultural and historical tradition, universities are integrated within the state as the educational and research arm in modern China (Zha & Hayhoe, 2014). By the same token, academics in modern Chinese universities inherently link their intellectual pursuits to serving the interests of the state, not to mention the recent call by President Xi at a symposium with scientists for breaking new ground that can meet the needs of the nation and its people (Zhang, 2020). In that regard, Chinese academics typically demonstrate academic nationalism.

The political and institutional constraints of nationalism also resulted in the Western critiques of the contentious academic freedom and institutional autonomy in China, while the two concepts have been upheld by the Western universities as essential conditions for academic excellence (van der Wende, 2018). For example, the tightening state restrictions in access to information and control of oppositions have even crossed the border to the demand that Cambridge University Press ban access to specific articles critical of the Chinese government (Douglass, 2017). For better or worse, Chinese intellectuals have come to terms with such constraints and the lead of the state. Taking a cultural perspective, Li (2012) argues that Chinese academics enjoy “intellectual freedom” and “institutional self-mastery” in comparison with the two notions of a Western
university. Furthermore, as noted by Zha (2010), Chinese academics assume the role of “constructive critics” (cf. social critics in the West) to contribute to policymaking at different levels in the system. However, some of them leveraged the vast government investment in developing HE and were lured to take diverse “shortcuts” to power and influence, leading to serious issues of academic integrity and corruption (Zha, 2010).

Despite these issues and problems, academic nationalism largely contributes to the implementation of state-led initiatives such as the WCUs campaign, and to some extent, to the cohesion among Chinese academics toward achieving such a common goal. Nonetheless, heated debate on the standard and components of a WCU raised concerns over the loss of a university spirit—an independent ethos cohering the Chinese academic community to pursue the truth and serve the public good (Xun, 2012; Zha & Hayhoe, 2014).

The imported and rising academic internationalism

Academic internationalism is Western in origin, being introduced into Chinese HE along with the internationalization of HE in China. According to Nelson (2013), “the idea of disinterested scholarship was invented to memorialize its absence” (p. 93) during the Enlightenment and has sustained the idea of academic freedom for ages. Acknowledge it or not, modern academics classified by nationality serve the interests of the state in multiple ways, and they need to carefully balance their identity between cosmopolitan and national citizen. To describe the entanglement of internationalism and nationalism, Hobson (1906, as cited in Sluga, 2013, p. 155) invoked the concept of simultaneity. Likewise, it is noteworthy that academic internationalism should not be interpreted as being at the opposite end of the spectrum, rather it is built out of and intertwined with academic nationalism.

HE internationalization has significantly (re)shaped the identity of Chinese academics through international academic collaboration, though mostly observed in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. For example, China’s research output has been growing in the past decade and constituted the largest proportion (21%) in the Scopus database of global science and engineering publications in 2018 (White, 2019). Also, Chinese scientists have been playing a leading role in COVID-19 research and publications (Lee & Haupt, 2020). As Chinese scholars integrate with the international academic community, they undergo socialization and learn to adopt the values, attitudes, beliefs, and norms of the international community to which they aspire to become accepted members. However, the process is not always easy as the conflict of two different set of academic values is inevitable.

China’s outstanding success in science development cannot be achieved without mitigating the tensions between government interference and academic values. Deng Xiaoping’s visionary policy that underlay the disciplinary culture of open science and increased autonomy is necessary for Chinese scientists to effectively engage with the global scientific community (Marginson, 2018). But China’s striking research performance may not be purely viewed as a manifestation of Chinese academics serving the broader ends of truth, rather it is entwined with the state nationalism, as previously noted, in the current global engagement period of its HE internationalization.

Global and local agendas are not mutually exclusive in international academic collaboration. Indeed, a melding of both agendas to achieve “national/global synergy” is perhaps a salient feature of China’s top-down approach to HE internationalization (Marginson, 2018). Chinese universities have to juggle responding to governmental agendas and gaining resources for self-development including cross-border initiatives (Zha et al., 2019). However, the incompatibility of internationalization, institutional autonomy, and educational sovereignty within Chinese HE system looms large in international cooperation, particularly in Sino-foreign joint ventures (Postiglione, 2020). When global agenda is at odds with national agenda in cross-border collaborations,
Chinese academics will struggle to search for a delicate balance between the imported academic internationalism and the inherent academic nationalism.

In addition, given the remarkable economic development and government policy initiatives, an increasing number of Chinese academics from overseas have gravitated to work in Chinese universities. These academic returnees are likely to be the backbone of research force and boost cross-border collaboration and integration with the international academic community. Nonetheless, most of these returnees have to reconstruct their academic identity while struggling with the unhealthy academic culture and environment (see Ai, 2019; Yang, 2020). These challenges experienced by academic returnees can also be explained by the clash of academic values during their socialization process. In most cases, these returnees would identify themselves as accepted members of the international academic community and undergo socialization reversely. That is, they need to learn to adopt the values, attitudes, beliefs, and norms of the Chinese academic community dominated by academic nationalism in order to participate effectively.

As HE internationalization proceeds, a positive hybridization of academic culture and a new model of citizenship are also forming among Chinese scholars, not only in more globally engaged elite universities (Yang, 2019) but also in provincial universities (Szelényi & Rhoads, 2013). In other words, these Chinese scholars have been reconstructing their academic identities toward achieving a balance between academic nationalism and academic internationalism. In addition, it is argued that China’s Belt and Road Initiative—another demonstration of “national/global synergy”—has potential to bolster a continued rise of academic internationalism among Chinese scholars to serve the regional and global common good.

Discussion

Proposed academic identity model

Based on the foregoing theoretical lens and analysis, a model of academic identity is proposed to illustrate the (re)construction of Chinese academic identity influenced by the two intersecting dimensions of academic values and agenda over time (see Figure 1). First, the vertical dimension

![Figure 1. Academic Identity Model.](image-url)
of Chinese academic values—Western academic values indicates the clash and integration of the imported Western academic values with the indigenous Chinese academic values in China’s HE shaping how Chinese faculty members perceive and identify themselves as they integrate with the international academic community. Second, the horizontal dimension of national agenda—global agenda suggests the responses to national and global agenda shaping the identity of Chinese academics as national citizens and cosmopolitans.

The (re)construction of Chinese academic identity in the past 40 years, as roughly shown by the circles in Figure 1, is in line with the further and global engagement periods of China’s HE internationalization. For instance, in the 1980–1990s period, Chinese academics had been mostly engaged in realizing “the four modernizations” of its nation and made little efforts to integrate the Western academic values with the Chinese academic values. In the 2000–2010s period, though largely driven by the national agenda, China’s HE became more globally engaged and more efforts had been made to indigenize the Western academic values among Chinese academics and respond to the global agenda. As the internationalization of HE in China continues, it is foreseeable that Chinese academics will keep (re)constructing a more balanced identity between the nationalist and internationalist dimensions to better integrate with the international academic community from 2020 onward.

**Toward sustainable HE internationalization**

While the pandemic has intensified uncertainty and complexity, China is leading economic recovery from the health crisis and will undoubtedly play a more active role in globalization and HE internationalization in the post–COVID-19 era. In contrast to the rising national protectionism elsewhere, China is determined to persist in its opening-up policy despite the impact of the pandemic. Alongside joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the world’s largest trade bloc, in November 2020, China also becomes the emerging innovation epicenter (Tse, 2020). In terms of HE internationalization, according to the Ministry of Education (2020), China will double down its support in the following main areas: a) inbound and outbound student mobility, b) Chinese-foreign cooperation in running schools, c) Chinese HE institutions’ operating offshore, and d) China’s online education. The policy initiatives appear to provide more opportunities for global collaboration both at home and abroad, especially in regions along the Belt and Road. Yet, we hope the good intention will end up with good reality. In light of the increasing polarization and nationalism, it is high time to rethink the issue of academic identity amid geopolitical tensions, as Chinese academics are key actors for smoother future global collaboration and sustainable HE internationalization.

The meanings and priorities of HE internationalization evolve over time in response to the changing environment. Most recently, de Wit and Deca (2020) call for an alignment of HE internationalization with human values and the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN to counteract the effect of the overriding economic rationale and tackle the challenges of our time. To achieve these goals and contribute to the global public good, international cooperation rather than confrontation is necessitated based on mutual understanding. It echoes with Kirby’s (2014) argument that Chinese universities will not take the lead without cooperating with world-leading universities. As China moves toward the role of a global leader, Chinese scholars need to stay vigilant about the imbalanced nationalist and internationalist dimensions of their academic identity to better engage with the international community and contribute to the world knowledge system. It is crucial to recognize that the dominant role of the state is unlikely to disappear in China’s HE internationalization. However, global collaboration initiatives steered not by faculty but by government are less likely to sustain (Tierney, 2020).
Most importantly, as pointed out by van der Wende (2018), truly excellent research culture may not occur without systemic changes in academic motivation toward genuine intellectual curiosity and university administration including more autonomy and less government interference. Given the central role of academics in a knowledge-based economy, it is imperative for multiple stakeholders in Chinese HE to build a supportive academic community and healthy academic culture together. More empirical studies on the Chinese academic identity (re)construction and the differences across disciplines and institutions are expected to observe the ongoing changes and enhance our understanding of the Chinese academic identity, and shed light on the future global collaboration and sustainable HE internationalization in China.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this conceptual article brings in a novel view from the critical concept of academic identity to engage and advance the current discussions on the challenges and issues of HE internationalization in China, especially the cross-border collaboration in HE. It broadens the scope of our thinking and contributes to the literature by examining the concept of academic identity in Chinese HE context through the lens of academic nationalism and academic internationalism. The analytical review of the literature reveals that modern Chinese scholars are constantly searching for a delicate balance between the imported academic internationalism and the inherent academic nationalism. Although HE internationalization has significantly (re)shaped the identity of Chinese academics, it is argued that a more balanced identity between the nationalist and internationalist dimensions among Chinese academics is essential for them to better integrate and collaborate with their international peers as well as for sustainable HE internationalization in an era of flux. The stress and tensions between the state and scholarship are always there, what is imperative, however, is whether we have a direction forward.

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