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Transforming traditions into academic resources: a study of Chinese scholars in the humanities and social sciences

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Abstract
The asymmetrical global higher education and knowledge systems ordered by Euro–American hegemony have been increasingly interrogated, especially by scholars in the humanities and social sciences (HSS). With gathering awareness, growing HSS scholars from non-Western backgrounds have called for global intellectual pluriversality. Responding to such a trend, this article sheds new light on the status quo of East Asian and other non-Euro–American intellectual traditions by taking Chinese intellectual traditions as a case. Since the nineteenth century, generations of Chinese intellectuals have strived to transform their intellectual traditions into modern resources. This historical mission has been carried on by contemporary scholars and become even more complex in the current global era. By unpacking the real perceptions and recent experiences of Chinese HSS scholars, this study demonstrates that Chinese intellectual traditions deeply influence today's knowledge production and have been transformed into three kinds of academic resources: approaches, methodologies/paradigms, and theories. However, the transformation process has never been smooth. Domestically, the great endeavours of Chinese HSS scholars are often impeded by the dominant intellectual extraversion and coercive audit culture; internationally, they feel constrained by epistemic injustice. This article proposes an empirical approach to examining and presenting intellectual traditions in the individual experiences of scholars. It reveals the high complexities of navigating through asymmetrical globalisation to achieve intellectual pluriversality.

Keywords Globalisation · Higher education · Intellectual pluriversality · Chinese intellectual traditions · The humanities and social sciences

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Introduction

The establishment of modern global higher education worldwide has been based on global knowledge asymmetries ordered by Euro–American centrism and hegemony. As learners of Euro–American models and experiences, non-Euro–American agents have been rendered peripheral, facing such challenges as linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), academic dependency (Alatas, 2003), epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), intellectual extraversion (Hountondji, 2006), to name but a few. Despite increasing attempts to challenge the determinist centre–periphery pattern (Marginson & Xu, 2023), asymmetrical globalisation continues, especially in the humanities and social sciences (HSS) that are deeply entangled with social and cultural contexts (Yang, 2014).

Recent reflections on Euro–American domination have burgeoned. With growing awareness of the significance of their traditional resources, more and more non-Western HSS scholars call for intellectual pluriversality (Reiter, 2018) to break the Euro–American epistemic dictatorship, better meet their local needs, and provide alternative cultural perspectives on global issues to enrich human wisdom. It is thus important and highly timely to bring more non-Western intellectual traditions into global theorisation. Some HSS scholars from non-Western civilisations have introduced their intellectual traditions into English, such as Africa (Hilliard, 1998), Latin America (Kamugisha, 2019), and Asia (Squarcini, 2011), showing their intellectual traditions surviving colonisation and/or modernisation with deep impact on education and knowledge production. Such studies, however, are overwhelmingly philosophical, historical, or biographical, lacking empirical data on how present-day intellectuals deal with their intellectual traditions.

As China's role grows, Chinese[1] intellectual traditions are increasingly highlighted as global epistemic resources, to which HSS scholars have made great efforts and contribution. HSS disciplines in China are established under the umbrella of 'wenke', separated from the natural sciences and engineering (NSE) (Liu, 2018). Although differences in academic patterns exist within HSS disciplines, HSS research in general is more rooted in Chinese contexts than NSE research and thus faces more challenges in the process of internationalisation. An urgent task for Chinese HSS researchers is 'to explore how, and under what conditions, China's indigenous traditions of thought can serve to inspire and structure more generally applicable social and political theory' (Yang, 2023, p. 13). This qualitative study explores how Mainland Chinese HSS scholars have transformed intellectual traditions in today's contexts within China and globally. We argue that while Chinese intellectual traditions can be transformed into crucial academic resources, China's HSS scholars face domestic and international complexities in knowledge production.

Based on the case of China, we argue empirically for approaches to contextualise different intellectual traditions in the actions, perceptions, and even struggles of East Asian scholars. Although sharing similar cultural heritage and modern history, each East Asian society has its unique intellectual pattern (see more in the next section). Taking Confucian tradition as an instance, it has been interacting with Buddhism and Shinto traditions in Japan, mixed with Taoism in Taiwan, and developed another Neo-Confucian branch in Korea (Shin, 2013). These traditions have been transformed throughout modernisation, constitute the 'twisted roots' (Altbach, 1989) of higher education, and influence today's

[1] The term 'Chinese' in this article is used in a cultural rather than ethnic sense. It describes things belonging to and people identifying with the culture and history of China.

HSS researchers in each East Asian society (Takayama, 2022). By illustrating the current state of Chinese intellectual traditions in HSS research, this study paves the way for comparisons across East Asian traditions to identify similarities and differences. Doing so could contribute to the individual perspective of scholars to fostering an inter-referencing East Asian academic community (Chen, 2010) and global intellectual pluriversality.

Theoretical and historical background

Although lacking a wide consensus, there have been continuing debates around the issue of knowledge production in non-Western societies from various perspectives. However, little attention has been paid to the role of intellectual traditions in tackling this issue, which is essential for understanding the past and the present of non-Western scholarships.

For most non-Western societies, globalisation is a programme of colonialisation and/or Westernisation that has been inextricably intertwined with modernisation (Mignolo, 2011). Many researchers have analysed the disadvantaged academic/epistemic position of non-Western societies in the world through various geospatial routes. Southern theory (Connell, 2007) and centre-periphery model (Altbach, 2009) picture the global space according to the asymmetrical knowledge distribution, laying theoretical foundations for empirical explorations (Marginson & Xu, 2023). Epistemic injustice, which basically refers to an act of discriminating against someone in their capacity as a knower (Fricker, 2007), and Foucault's theory of knowledge/power are adopted as powerful tools to reveal the Western dominance in knowledge globalisation (Geerlings & Lundberg, 2018).

Some postcolonial inquiries are valuable for rethinking the present condition of knowledge production in non-Western places. Argentine semiotician Mignolo's (2018) intellectual 'pluriversality' calls for constructing a global intellectual landscape where diverse forms of knowledge and pluriversal epistemologies coexist. African philosopher Hountondji (2006) proposes 'intellectual extraversion' to describe the tendency of scientific research in post-colonial countries to turn to the outside world and respond to the demands of the 'intellectual centre'. Taiwanese sociologist Chen's (2010) 'Asia as method' points out the epistemic anxieties shared by postcolonial societies, highlighting the importance of inter-Asian mutual understanding.

Although fruitful, the above debates seldom delve into the tension brought by globalisation between modernisation and intellectual traditions in non-Western societies. Shils (1972) defined an intellectual tradition as 'a set or pattern of beliefs, conceptions of form, sets of verbal (and other symbolic) usages, [and] rules of procedure' (p. 23), transmitted by intellectuals and especially rooted in indigenous cultures for intellectuals in Africa, Asian, and Latin America. In these societies, intellectuals have been torn between Western-derived modernity and pre-modern cultural heritage, struggling with defining, repositioning, and transforming their traditions. Extensive evidence can be found in the literature about African, Asian, and Latin American educational and intellectual histories. To provide the most relevant historical information, we will give a snapshot of HSS intellectual pathways in East Asia and particularly in China.

East Asian higher education systems are commonly characterised by a mixture of Western institutional patterns and the Confucian tradition (Marginson, 2011). Sharing similar experience of learning from the West, East Asian societies have established modern universities and disciplines patterning after Western models since the nineteenth century. In this process, they experienced different encounters with the West, developed

various understandings of 'tradition', and thus stepped on divergent historical trajectories (Hayhoe, 1995). Nonetheless, the common core issue of how to integrate imposed Western and indigenous traditional values in higher education has never been settled, which is particularly true for HSS scholars. Modern Japanese scholarship developed in absorbing both traditional Chinese and Western (first European and then American) scholarships (Kaneko, 2004; Nakayama, 1984). Since the *Meiji* period (1868–1912), the Japanese government and intellectuals have been struggling to explore their own cultural roots and indigenous patterns of HSS research (Hayhoe, 1998; Phan, 2013). For Korean intellectuals, the process of intellectual synthesis of traditional and borrowed ideas began in 1876. Since then, the nationalism tendency has continued to influence South Korean HSS research (Shin & Han, 2010). While pursuing internationalisation, today's Korean higher education and academic culture are still significantly shaped by the Confucian tradition (Kim, 2005; Shin, 2012).

China's modern intellectual history unfolded as globalisation brought Western-patterned universities, disciplines, and knowledge at the turn of the twentieth century. In this process, Chinese intellectuals gradually discarded traditional Chinese scholarship and turned to French, American, British, and Germany patterns for modernity (Hayhoe, 1996). During the 1920s–1930s, many scholars in the humanities advocated a 'systematic reorganisation of the national heritage' (*zhengli guogu*) based on the 'advanced' and 'scientific' ideas from the West (Yu, 2016, p. 209). Social scientists strived to localise social science subjects by applying Western theories and methodologies to China's social circumstances (Gransow, 2008).

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 reoriented modernisation to the Soviet model. During the 1950s–1960s, Chinese HSS scholars gave up both the Western and their traditional academic patterns and devoted themselves to building a socialist nation. This was interrupted by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), a political turmoil that tried to uproot both traditional Confucian and foreign (including Western and Soviet) values (Hayhoe, 1996). Until 1978, China's opening up ushered in an era of internationalisation. Since the 1980s, Chinese HSS scholars have enthusiastically reembraced international academic patterns following Euro-American methodologies, discourses, theories, and paradigms (Deng, 2010). Simultaneously, debates on how to transform traditions persist among Chinese HSS scholars in and beyond Mainland China, including Lin (1988) proposal for 'creative transformation', Li (1998) 'transformative creation', and Wang (2003) distinctive political culture based on combining Chinese tradition and Western modernity.

For Chinese and other East Asian HSS scholars, transforming intellectual traditions is not a new task but an arduous journey across generations. It becomes even more complex in today's global era. As Yang et al. (2019) argue, it is a continuing cultural mission to figure out how to wed Western higher education standards with Chinese traditional values. Only when this is achieved can Chinese HSS scholars find their spiritual homeland and feel settled. This study contextualises this mission in present-day Chinese HSS scholars' pursuits and attendant pains and gains. Doing so can uncover the current conditions of Chinese intellectual traditions with implications for other East Asian and non-Western societies. Specifically, we focus on the following two questions:

(1) How do contemporary Chinese HSS scholars transform their intellectual traditions into modern and global academic resources?

(2) In doing so, what difficulties and challenges do Chinese HSS scholars confront both domestically and internationally?

Method and data

Aiming to capture the participants' perceptions and experiences, which lie at the centre of qualitative research (Patton, 2015), this study employs a qualitative methodology to interpret what Chinese intellectual traditions mean to the participants and builds a holistic and informative picture of how the participants have transformed these traditions in knowledge production.

Our data collection was divided into three steps from October 2021 to August 2022. It started with extensively reading published works, to identify potential participants for purposive sampling. Fifty Chinese HSS scholars were selected as target participants, all of whom were working in research-intensive universities in Mainland China and had shown great concern about Chinese traditions in their published works. Diversity of gender, age, location of their affiliated institutions, and research fields was also considered. Two groups of Chinese scholars were not included as our participants. One group was Mainland Chinese scholars born before the 1950s. Because most of them had retired, their contact information was seldom publicly posted. It was difficult to find their email address and phone numbers to contact them. The other group was (ethnic) Chinese scholars outside of Mainland China who were widely divergent in location, higher education system, academic culture, cultural background, etc. Considering such a huge complexity and our limited time, we decided to focus on Mainland Chinese HSS scholars who constitute the majority of Chinese HSS scholars.

We designed semi-structured interview outlines consisting of basic questions about Chinese intellectual traditions. We then tailored questions based on the life experiences and academic viewpoints of each targeted participant and contacted them through email. Twenty of them accepted our interview invitation. Before each interview, we sent them the consent form, clearly explaining research topics and questions, procedures, and potential risks and ensuring their participation was totally voluntary. All interviews were conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from 1 to 3 h in length. After each interview, we collated the interview transcript through member-checking so that interviewees could correct factual errors and decide what information to put on record.

Our basic content analysis went simultaneously with data collection. We reread the published works of the interviewees in depth, including their articles, books, (auto)biographies, and other public interviews. We also included eight additional targeted participants who did not participate in the interviews as complementary participants, as their experiences and perceptions reflected in published works could significantly enrich our findings. All the participants were numbered for the convenience of data analysis and article writing. We numbered the twenty interviewees with the prefix 'P' and the eight complementary participants with the prefix 'Pc'. Detailed information on all 28 participants is listed in Table 1. P3, P4, P8, P9, P13, and P18 expressed explicitly that they did not mind being identified. Therefore, we kept their identifying ideas when presenting findings. For the other interviewees who preferred to be anonymous and complementary participants, we removed their identifying particulars and details as much as possible. Considering most of them preferred to be anonymous, we dealt with the participants' interviews and published works as textual data rather than citations.

Table 1 List of interviewees and complementary participants

No	Gender	Birth decade	Location	Research field
P1	Male	1960s	Shanxi	Education
P2	Male	1960s	Shanghai	Chinese history
P3	Male	1960s	Beijing	Chinese history
P4	Male	1960s	Beijing	Sociology
P5	Male	1960s	Guangdong	Chinese literature
P6	Male	1960s	Beijing	Political science
P7	Male	1960s	Shanghai	Philosophy
P8	Male	1960s	Zhejiang	Chinese philosophy
P9	Male	1970s	Zhejiang	Anthropology
P10	Male	1970s	Beijing	Philosophy
P11	Male	1970s	Beijing	Marxist philosophy
P12	Male	1970s	Beijing	Archaeology
P13	Male	1970s	Beijing	Aesthetics
P14	Male	1970s	Beijing	Political science
P15	Male	1970s	Shanghai	Western philosophy
P16	Male	1970s	Beijing	Chinese philosophy
P17	Male	1970s	Shanghai	Law
P18	Male	1980s	Beijing	Education
P19	Male	1980s	Beijing	Education
P20	Male	1980s	Beijing	Chinese literature
Pc21	Female	1950s	Beijing	Sociology
Pc22	Female	1950s	Jiangsu	Education
Pc23	Male	1960s	Hubei	Chinese literature
Pc24	Male	1960s	Guangdong	Translatology
Pc25	Male	1960s	Beijing	Chinese philology
Pc26	Male	1960s	Hunan	Education
Pc27	Male	1970s	Beijing	Sociology
Pc28	Male	1970s	Beijing	Law

After organising the data, we conducted a six-step thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) of (1) the 20 interview transcripts and (2) the published works of all 28 participants. The two parts of data corroborated each other, ensuring the comprehensive and valid identification of themes. After familiarising ourselves with the data, we first captured the relevant meanings about Chinese tradition through systematic coding. We then generated initial themes inductively by identifying the shared patterns among the segment codes across different participants and contexts. The themes were further developed, refined, and named around three key points of our main research questions: the forms of intellectual traditions in their knowledge production, the difficulties they experienced in domestic academia, and the challenges they faced in international academic communities.

Research findings

Three main forms of academic resources

Our data show that the participants are transforming Chinese intellectual traditions into three main forms of academic resources: approaches, methodologies/paradigms, and theories. By exploiting Chinese intellectual traditions, some participants have produced academic innovations and gained reputation.

Form 1: approaches

There were three major dimensions of Confucian learning in ancient China: evidential investigation (*kaozheng* or *kaoju*), the study of moral principles (*yili*), and literary art (*cizhang* or *wenzhang*) (Ropp, 1981; Yu, 2016).[2] Our findings demonstrate that today's Chinese HSS scholars draw upon the three dimensions as their scholarly approaches to examining historical or literary texts, interpreting social phenomena and philosophical ideas, and developing new writing styles.

Aiming at 'sifting out the true from the false and determining the true message of ancient sages' (Ropp, 1981, p. 43), evidential investigation in ancient China referred to carefully examining various versions of Chinese classics, based on textual evidence and minute analysis of the language. As experts in different HSS fields, nine participants (P3, P13, P14, P17, P18, P20, Pc23, Pc24, Pc25) have used this approach to examine texts far beyond Confucian classics, including all kinds of ancient Chinese classics (Pc25) and historical documents for aesthetic (P13) and literary (P20) research. Some researchers tend to associate it with textual criticism (Hein, 2019). For example, Pc23 has focused on the similarities between textual criticism and evidential investigation and tried to combine them in modern Chinese literary research. By so doing, he has systematically established 'modern evidential investigation', involving knowledge of historiography, geography, and political sciences. He claimed: '[Traditional evidential investigation] mainly examined a text with other texts, while modern evidential investigation covers other materials (like underground antiquities) and absorbs ideas of other disciplines as a new approach.'

In ancient China, the study of moral principles sought guidance from the classics to handle social relationships. Within the process, Confucian moral principles were established chiefly through metaphysical speculations and interpretations (Yu, 2016, p. 8). The participants use this interpretative approach today to analyse various texts (P3, P8, P10, P16, P17) and even to understand the society (P18). In philosophy, it is usually associated with hermeneutics. Indeed, three participants see it as a Chinese hermeneutic tradition and an important approach to studying Chinese philosophy (P8, P10, P16). P10 stated that 'there are many schools in hermeneutics [in the world], and the study of moral principles can be seen as one.' The approach enables researchers to reinterpret ancient classics based on present times and then form new philosophical ideas for addressing social issues (P16). P18 viewed the study of moral principles as a bridge between the text and the society. It could help researchers contextualise legal history in social realities of different periods and gain new insights into today's Chinese society.

[2] There are different English translations for *kaozheng* (考证, or *kaoju* 考据), *yili* (义理), and *cizhang* (辞章, or *wenzhang* 文章). This research mainly follows the translations by Ropp (1981) and Yu (2016).

Ancient Chinese literary art was rendered as the skilful and aesthetic pursuit of literary expression, genres, and stylistic excellence (Jin, 2020). Four participants mentioned literary art as traditional writing genres (P5, P10, P16, P20). According to P10, traditional dialogical (exemplified by *The Analects of Confucius*) and epistolary genres are more suitable than academic papers for philosophical writing. P20 has taken full advantage of the traditional biographical genre (*jizhuan ti*)[3] in his doctoral thesis writing. He analysed the development of modern Chinese literature by vividly portraying the lives of some literary giants and their relationships. By borrowing this traditional genre, he found a 'character-centred' approach to presenting literary history other than the regular linear narrative style. In the interview, P20 explained: 'Chinese historians had notably accentuated the character since *Sima Qian*. … But in modern times, the event has become the unit of historical writing'. He thought adopting the traditional biographical genre enabled a more effective articulation of Chinese literature's nuanced historical changes.

Form 2: methodologies/paradigms

As before mentioned, Chinese HSS scholars have customarily relied on Euro–American methodologies and paradigms in their research since the 1980s. Seven participants attempted to break away such reliance by developing their own methodologies (*fangfa lun*) (P4, Pc24) and paradigms (*fanshi*) (P3, P6, P9, P12, P14), as they claimed, by selecting, modulating, and synthesising Chinese traditions.

P4 and Pc24 rethought and improved existing research tools in their fields by borrowing some traditional Chinese ideas. Pc24 published on how to generate new methodologies of Chinese–English translation by harnessing traditional ideas. For example, *yin–yang*, a traditional Chinese cosmology rooted in dynamic correlative thinking (Graham, 1986), 'as an interpretative methodology has not drawn enough attention' (Pc24). After critically examining some existing English translations of *The Analects of Confucius*, he criticised many of them for detaching the text from its context as well as the lives of Confucius and his students. In Pc24's eyes, the text is not static but is always in the interaction with information beyond it. A good translation emerges from the dynamic meaning synthesis between the context and the author's life, between Chinese and English, just like the unceasing interaction between *yin* and *yang*.

Similarly, P4 constructed an eight-dimension methodology for sociological fieldwork based on Chinese traditions and his research experience. Two dimensions came from *The Classic of Changes* (*I Ching* or *Yi Jing*): He interpreted '[g]rasping the infinitesimally small and what is manifestly obvious' as that anthropologists should start with noticing details, accumulate knowledge of subtle aspects of people's lives, and then construct a holistic scenario of society and culture; and 'understanding the soft as well as the hard' as combining 'hard' rational data collection with 'soft' feelings and empathy.[4]

More participants proposed 'new paradigms' based on traditional Chinese scholarship to better contextualise HSS knowledge in China. Two political scientists, P6 and P14, shared

[3] *Jizhuan ti* (纪传体) is a traditional Chinese writing genre pioneered by Sima Qian (司马迁) (145–86 BC), a grand historian of the Han dynasty. It saw history as a record of people's lives rather than a string of events (Mann, 2009).

[4] *I Ching* or *Yi Jing* (易经) is one of the most influential classics in ancient China. The two phrases from *Yi Jing* quoted by P4 are '*zhi wei zhi zhang*' (知微知彰) and '*zhi rou zhi gang*' (知柔知刚), translated as above by Lynn (1994, p. 85).

a similar view: the 'classics-history tradition' (*jing shi chuantong*) should be exploited as a primary paradigm of Chinese political research. While the discipline of political science did not exist in ancient China, political thoughts can be found in ancient classics (*jing*) and history (*shi*). P12 attached great importance to traditional epigraphy (*jinshi xue*)[5] as an archaeological paradigm. Traditional epigraphy combined the collection and connoisseurship of antiquities and studied steles for their historical, epigraphic, and calligraphic value. By borrowing it in archaeological studies, researchers can simultaneously obtain the historical information an antiquity carries, enjoy the sense of beauty it possesses, and enter the spirit of the age when the antiquity was made. P12 believed that traditional epigraphy could make new contributions to Chinese and world archaeology.

Form 3: theories

According to our data, quite a few participants tried to avoid being trapped by the two well-beaten paths of most Chinese HSS scholars: applying Western 'universal' theories directly to the China case or using the case of China to contribute to Western theories (Zhang, 2017). They adopted two strategies to put forward new theories based on Chinese traditions: (1) extracting theories directly from traditional resources and (2) theorising traditions as counterparts of existing (mainly 'Western') theories.

Six participants distilled theories from traditional Chinese notions or ideas (P1, P7, P10, P14, P18, Pc22). For example, three education researchers, P1, P18, and Pc22, called for unearthing Mohist and Confucian educational thoughts after critically examining current educational theories and pedagogies. Mohism was a school of thought in ancient China, containing the germs of science and logic (Graham, 1978). Pc22 introduced it into scientific education, holding that 'reviving Mohist logical and experimental thoughts [as a theory of scientific education] can help [Chinese educators] resolve the conflicts between traditional Chinese humanistic and modern scientific ideas.' P18 extracted five Confucian constant virtues (*wuchang*)[6] as a coherent theory for moral education. He claimed that '[t]he system of five virtues is not fixed; rather, it is dynamic through history', and '[w]hether it is still valuable depends on how we grasp and reinterpret it. Only on this basis can we fully integrate it into the current Zeitgeist and educational activities.'

More participants indicated a preference for the second strategy (P6, P8, P11, P13, P15, P19, Pc22, Pc24, Pc26). They presumed that their theories are alternative vantage points from Chinese culture and can complement existing theories that are limited by a monocultural perspective. P13's theoretical innovations are telling. The most famous is Chinese 'living aesthetics' (*shenghuo meixue*), which he has published in both Chinese and English. His thinking followed four steps: (1) critically reviewing the growing trend of the 'aesthetics of everyday life' in Euro–American scholarship, (2) introducing the differences between Chinese and Western ideas about life and aesthetics, (3) analysing the fundamental elements of traditional Chinese aesthetics and then synthesising them into theories of living aesthetics with 'neo-Chineseness', and (4) arguing for the global value of Chinese living aesthetics and a new aesthetic agenda shared by Asia and Euro–America.

[5] The term *jinshi* (金石, literally means 'metal and stone') appeared as early as the fifth century BC and then evolved into *jinshi xue* (金石学), a tradition of antiquarian scholarship (Wang, 2022).

[6] *Wuchang* (五常) includes *ren* (仁, benevolence or humaneness), *yi* (义, rightness or righteousness), *li* (礼, propriety or ritual), *zhi* (智, wisdom or intelligence), and *xin* (信, faithfulness or trust) (Yao, 2003, p. 660).

Similar steps could be observed in the works of P8, who tried to promote the dialogue between cosmopolitanism and Confucianism. He believed that although cosmopolitanism originated from the West, cosmopolitan ideas do exist elsewhere. Borrowing the African American philosopher Appiah (1997) 'rooted cosmopolitanism', P8 excavated a kind of Confucian rooted cosmopolitanism by systematically examining and comparing Appiah's ideas with those of Confucius. He further argued that Confucianism, as a form of rooted cosmopolitanism or cosmopolitan patriotism, can serve as theoretical and practical resources for reconciling the tension between cosmopolitanism and patriotism/nationalism.

Difficulties and challenges

Most of the participants have made notable contributions to their fields. Yet, the process of transforming Chinese intellectual traditions has been fraught with hindrances. Three types of difficulties and challenges emerged from their experiences: domestically, the dominant intellectual extraversion and coercive audit culture have impeded their efforts; and internationally, they have felt constrained by epistemic injustice.

Intellectual extraversion

Our findings demonstrate that the intellectual extraverted tendency has prevailed in Chinese academic circles, manifesting in two extremes: a Western-oriented mindset and particularism. Both have hindered the transformation of Chinese intellectual traditions.

Twenty-one participants reflected that a Western-oriented mindset has been deeply ingrained in the minds of many Chinese HSS scholars. They pointed out various manifestations of the Western-oriented mindset: some scholars blindly worship 'the advanced Western scholarship' and its 'logical and scientific qualities' (P7, Pc24); some are habituated to turning to Euro–American coordinates and patterns (P10, P13), including issues, discourses, paradigms, and theories (P5, P17, P18, Pc24, Pc28); and some define Chinese thoughts (P15) or study Chinese societies (P4) exclusively with Western frameworks. The pervasive Western-oriented mindset has led many Chinese HSS scholars to abandon traditional Chinese scholarship while failing to truly understand Western scholarship (P12, P20, Pc22, Pc25, Pc26, Pc27), which further makes them lack the basic knowledge, awareness, and capacity of developing new methodologies, paradigms, and theories.

This Western-oriented mindset causes Chinese traditions to be largely unknown, underestimated, and misunderstood, which in turn reinforces the Western orientation. The participants lamented that knowing what Chinese traditions are is a prerequisite for transforming or reviving them (P11, P14, P15, P20), but people, especially younger generations (P6, P17), rarely have enough knowledge of traditions (P2, P5, Pc24, Pc26). Some participants frankly admitted that this applies to themselves, and that they have to make up missed lessons through self-study in order to know Chinese traditions better (P4, P5, P7, P11). Researching Chinese traditions is time-consuming as learning those traditions requires a significant investment of time and energy. Even worse, Chinese traditions are sometimes underestimated or misunderstood by many other scholars. They consider Chinese traditions 'useless' unless being systematised and structuralised into 'Western frameworks' (P6, P8, P14, P16, P18, Pc27) or 'unadvanced' and 'unscientific' when measured against 'Western yardsticks' including rigour, validity, and generality (P3, P12, P16, Pc25). Since the approaches, methodologies/paradigms, and theories, adopted by the participants, are built

upon Chinese traditions, they are easily challenged or rejected by others (P14, P19, P20) and are unlikely to become as popular as Western ones.

Another manifestation of intellectual extraversion is that researchers at the periphery often confine themselves to the particular and are unable and unwilling to raise their speculations to the universal (Hountondji, 1990). As criticised by sixteen participants, many Chinese HSS scholars exhibit such particularism, exclude themselves from international academic communities, and undermine the global value of Chinese traditions. These participants believe that while uncritically imitating the West is infeasible, it is also untenable to return to ancient China (P7, P9, P12) or revive the so-called 'authentic traditional scholarship' (P8) because today's Chinese scholarship is a mix of ancient, modern, indigenous, and foreign elements (P13, P18). The dangerous delusion that Chinese scholarship should be isolated from all 'Western discourses' (P10) can only lead to perverse nationalism, traditionalism, and nativism (P8, P13, Pc21). To avoid these problematic tendencies, the participants try to connect Chinese traditions with other globally recognised resources in their approaches as well as methodological and theoretical construction. Good examples include evidential investigation and textual criticism, the study of moral principles and hermeneutics, the construction of Chinese living aesthetics, and Confucian-rooted cosmopolitanism as discussed previously.

Particularism has two consequences. Firstly, Chinese traditions have been romanticised or simplified. As the participants noted, some Chinese HSS scholars have become obsessed with traditions and indulged in a sort of 'romantic nostalgia' (P3, P10), while some are busy chanting empty and mawkish slogans without any real action (P5, Pc27). Additionally, Chinese traditions are often narrowed to Confucianism, with other schools of thought marginalised (P13, P15). Sometimes, Chinese traditions are overprotected as if 'in a vacuum without modern bacteria' (P3), just like 'antiques in the museum' (P8). P3 and Pc27 believed that scholars who hold on to the particularism are 'destroying traditions with the intention of re-establishing or reviving traditions.' Secondly, the East–West dichotomy remains quite popular among Chinese HSS scholars. Some have focused too much on the separation and differences between 'Chinese/Eastern scholarship' and 'Western scholarship' (P8, Pc21, Pc28), ignoring the interplay between them and other 'neither-Chinese-nor-Western' scholarships (P9, Pc24). All of these means that transforming Chinese traditions into modern and global resources is not widely supported and practised.

Coercive audit culture

Audit culture in higher education is often represented by the officially imposed uniform categories, reckonings, evaluations, and assessments on a varied set of institutions (such as global university ranking schemes) and scholars (such as academic promotion systems) (Shore & Wright, 2015). It is also coercive in China's academic community and strongly shackles the participants' explorations of Chinese traditions, which usually require flexible writing formats (i.e. traditional dialogical and epistolary genres), sufficient time for creative thinking to develop new paradigms and theories, and supportive academic environments for their innovations. These requirements are hardly fulfilled due to the efficiency-seeking climate, the rigid rules set by journals, and the hierarchical systems.

The pressure to publish bears heavily on the participants in their everyday knowledge production practices, as researching Chinese traditions is time-consuming. Overstretched by innumerable quantified tasks and indicators, the participants struggle to make time for innovative thinking and writing (P5, P13, Pc26, Pc27). Their attention has been drawn

by external mechanisms, including the reputation and promotion that are obtainable only through ceaseless publishing (P9, P17, Pc25). For, Pc25, today's scholars have to publish as much as possible during a short-term project, which is detrimental to evidential investigation as it requires researchers to be patient 'bench warmers.' To P5 and P17, some scholars have even been promoting such a climate, rendering themselves auditable by setting high publishing efficiency as an overarching goal, and spending little time conducting solid studies and caring about others' works (P5, P17).

The publish-or-perish imperative also influences China's academic journals. To maintain high citation scores and ranks, journals focus on 'hot topics' (P17), set rigid writing formats and unified academic standards (P6, P10, P16, P20), and require submissions to follow popular paradigms and theories (P18). This only produces fragmented scholarship and leaves little space for traditional genres and innovative thoughts (P2, P3, P13, Pc27). For example, the dialogical and epistolary genres, which are mentioned above as two traditional Chinese resources of literary art, are more flexible for philosophical writing but have been replaced by standard academic articles (P10). P3 is also unhappy with the prevailing academic writing formats, describing them as a 'skeleton without flesh.' However, these formats have been exclusively authorised, and to assert one's own writing style would mean being 'out of tune with the mainstream standards' (P3).

In addition, the audit culture relies upon hierarchical systems and relationships, leaving the studies on Chinese traditions even more unpopular, esoteric, and marginalised in today's higher education environment. The biggest problem is the asymmetrical official support, including financial (Pc25, Pc27) and human resources (P1, P12) as well as institutional establishments (P18). According to Pc25, the studies of ancient Chinese classics and evidential investigation are not sufficiently valued by universities and governments. It is also hard to win grant funding. P12 expressed concern about the lack of talents and experts in traditional epigraphy (*jinshi xue*), as formal archaeological education rarely takes it into consideration. These asymmetries are intertwined with the publish-or-perish climate, creating inadequate incentives for research on Chinese traditions (P19).

Epistemic injustice

When bringing Chinese intellectual traditions into international knowledge production, half of the participants have encountered epistemic injustice (P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, P10, P12, P13, P15, P18, P19, P20, Pc24). They argue that 'the precondition of academic dialogue is an equal footing (P20)', but in fact, not many international researchers are willing to 'listen to Chinese stories' (P4) or embrace 'Chinese literature' (P5).

The most explicit difficulty caused by epistemic injustice is English as the academic lingua franca (Catala, 2022), hindering the participants' international knowledge production on Chinese traditions. Some participants find it almost insurmountable to translate some traditional Chinese notions and concepts into English (P3, P4, P7, P8, P10, P12, Pc24). As P7 and P8 stated, 'English has its own thousand-year cultural traditions' (P7) and that it is extremely difficult for Chinese scholars to 'write English as sophisticatedly as Anglophone scholars' (P8). Therefore, many Chinese scholars with deep knowledge of Chinese traditions have been shut out of the international academic circles (P8). P3 even admits that he gave up writing in English because he failed to find a way out of the untranslatability of Chinese traditions.

For those participants who can write skilfully and have published works in English, bilingual writing is a burden since it demands double efforts. It is also unfair for them

to compete with Anglophone scholars for international publications (P13, P15, P19). 'I'm proficient in English writing, which proves to be an advantage', P15 said, 'but on the flip side, it means that not everyone can do this.' Despite his proficiency, P15 acknowledges that writing a paper in English expounding upon Chinese traditions is no easy task; instead, it requires sophisticated abilities and enormous energy.

Compared with linguistic problems, some intellectual biases are implicit but not unusual, making the participants' theoretical innovations based on Chinese traditions undervalued by international colleagues. P9 and P13 had similar unpleasant experiences of publishing in English. P9 conducted an anthropological study using the Daoist thinker Laozi's thoughts as a theoretical lens. When he tried to publish it in English, he found that the international reviewers, who were great experts in anthropological theories, knew little about Laozi's thoughts. 'They told me that Laozi's idea is about an imaginary society and questioned me why his idea can be used to observe a real society,' he contended, 'but, for instance, isn't Plato's idea also about an imaginary society? Why is it so important and widely used to study China and other societies?' P13's Chinese living aesthetic theory was also challenged by an editor of a prestigious international journal. '[The editor] kept asking me: Does it have global significance? Can it be globalised or be examined under a universalist principle? Is it just local knowledge?' (P13).

Three philosophy researchers mentioned the marginal position of Chinese philosophy in the world (P7, P8, P10). P7's story about teaching Chinese philosophy at a German university is very telling. During his teaching, he faced many challenges from students, mainly about whether ancient Chinese thoughts could be accounted as 'philosophy'. One student said, 'I know what Confucius said makes sense, but I don't think it's philosophy.' P7 understood why some students thought this way, because in Western contexts, 'philosophy' is an old discipline that always refers to Western philosophy characterised by logic and reasoning. Chinese philosophy has been categorised into Sinology, along with Chinese literature and history. It is quite simply a Western matter.

Discussion and conclusion

This study provides lively evidence of how intellectual traditions function in the knowledge production of China's HSS scholars. For the participants, Chinese intellectual traditions have various meanings and contents. Overall, they are perceived as certain notions, ideas, and ways of knowing and writing that originated from ancient China. They can be applied in today's knowledge production after certain modifications. They can be research approaches as well as critical components of new methodologies/paradigms and theories. Some of them have already been introduced to the world through international publications. Continuing to guide contemporary Chinese HSS scholars in academic work, they can be transformed into modern and global resources. This study also presents the most recent difficulties and challenges for Chinese HSS scholars to break the centre-periphery mould. While utilising traditional Chinese resources as approaches, methodologies/paradigms, and theories, Chinese HSS scholars lack sufficient support from domestic and international academic communities due to intellectual extraversion, the audit culture, and epistemic injustice. Their experiences prove fostering intellectual pluriversality to be a long-term intractable task.

The experiences of Chinese HSS scholars can help us rethink the intellectual traditions and the tendency of Sinocentrism in East Asia. Reflecting a Chinese perspective on

nationalism, Sinocentrism features the universality of Confucian ethics and the idea that Chinese culture is the best. Such a mentality turns into strong isolationism and humiliation when faced with stronger rivals, underlies China's modern development policy, and influences Chinese higher education at all levels (Yang, 2002). At the individual level, Chinese scholars have hardly dealt with Chinese and Western scholarships on equal footing during global knowledge exchange, as shown in our findings. Due to China's great impact on the region, the Sino-centric mindset and the problems it causes are possibly prevalent in East Asia (Pakhomov, 2021). This study calls for more studies exploring how contemporary East Asian HSS scholars in/from different societies transform their intellectual traditions, cope with Sinocentric issues, and face internationalisation. Comparing their experiences could promote regional inter-referencing and global intellectual construction.

Furthermore, there are rich intellectual traditions in other civilisation zones to be detected. In Africa and Latin America, for example, higher education and HSS knowledge systems have historically relied on foreign languages. Indigenous traditions are scattered in local communities and circulated in oral forms (Carvalho & Flórez-Flórez, 2014). Transforming traditions into resources and knowledge decolonialisation has been highly challenging for their HSS scholars. In international knowledge production, they encounter similar epistemic injustice as Chinese HSS scholars (Chimakonam, 2017). As the diversity and intricacy of traditions in broad non-Western societies still largely remain unknown, this study points to possible directions for discovering less-known intellectual traditions and for presenting the concerted efforts made by scholars to navigate asymmetrical globalisation.

This study has its limitations. First, its participants are all high-achieving scholars in their fields working at research-intensive universities. The broader community of scholars, especially those with less reputation, is difficult to identify through extensive reading. Nonetheless, high-achieving scholars are more likely to have a good knowledge of traditions and participate in international academic activities, making their experiences sufficiently enlightening for others. Due to the limitation of accessibility and time, the study did not involve Mainland Chinese scholars born before the 1950s, (ethnic) Chinese scholars outside of Mainland China, and non-Chinese East Asian scholars within and outside of Mainland China. The generations born during the 1930s–1940s, whose academic careers overlapped with the Soviet model and the Cultural Revolution, may have been more influenced by socialism and Maoism. (Ethnic) Chinese outside of Mainland China and non-Chinese East Asian scholars may also understand Chinese intellectual traditions differently because of their complex cultural backgrounds and living experiences. This study can thus be a stepping stone to future studies of scholars with diverse generations and identities.

Second, we use the terms 'Chinese/Western', 'Western/non-Western', and 'Euro–American/non-Euro–American' with no intention to accentuate dichotomies. Instead, we adopt them as a tool to reveal some tensions in asymmetrical globalisation. In reality, 'Western' and 'non-Western' elements have been already inseparable with a huge diversity within 'Chinese' and 'Western' as well as in 'Euro–American' and 'non-Euro–American' spheres.

The present study is a piece of the large jigsaw puzzle of global intellectual pluriversality. To make the 'jigsaw puzzle' more complete, higher education stakeholders worldwide need to work jointly and take actions step by step. Researchers need to integrate traditional knowledge resources into theoretical construction, develop methodologies to capture living traditions through empirical research, and pay more attention to real individual experiences of practising traditions in various ways. In addition, in-depth comparisons across traditions are needed through cross-cultural collaborations. With an equal footing and an open mind, it is feasible for teachers to involve multiple traditions in the curriculum to equip students with multicultural awareness and pluriversal epistemologies. International journals should

also contribute to epistemic diversity in knowledge production by engaging editors and reviewers with different cultural perspectives. Only by taking small steps constantly and consistently can we embrace intellectual pluriversality more fully.

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Data availability The data used during the study are available from the corresponding author, Yanzhen Zhu, by reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval As the research involves human participants, the study progressed through the ethics procedure at the university and was approved.

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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