"Can East Asian Students Think?": Orientalism, Critical Thinking, and the Decolonial Project

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Abstract: Amidst the increasing calls for the decolonisation of universities, this article interrogates the representation of East Asian students in Western academia. It is argued that East Asian students are often imagined in Orientalist ways, as can be evidenced by evaluating the depiction of East Asian students in academic publications. More specifically, it is suggested that common perceptions of East Asian students as lacking in critical thinking may unwittingly reinforce stereotypes that are rooted in historic narratives which depict East Asians as inferior to (white) Westerners. This article also explores the way in which East Asian academics and students may also subscribe to these Orientalist perceptions. Finally, this article offers a refutation of the stereotype that East Asian students struggle with critical thinking and it suggests that being more reflexive about the way that we imagine ethnic minority students should be a key component of our efforts to decolonise the university.

Keywords: Orientalism; East Asian students; critical thinking; higher education; stereotyping; decolonisation

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1. Introduction

"The European is a close reasoner; his statements of fact are devoid of any ambiguity; he is a natural logician, albeit he may not have studied logic; he is by nature sceptical and requires proof before he can accept the truth of any proposition; his trained intelligence works like a piece of mechanism. The mind of the Oriental, on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description"—Lord Cromer, 1908, as cited in Said. [1] (p. 38)

Walter Mignolo's preface to the book "Can non-Europeans think?" is succinctly entitled "Yes, we can" [2]. Mignolo is not known for such conciseness but in this instance, he offers an unwaveringly definitive answer because of the question's absurdity. Mignolo was so disturbed by the question that he even described it as an example of "epistemic racism" [2] (p. x). Yet, the question had to be asked because the answer is not as obvious to everyone as it may be to some of us. For instance, when Kishore Mahbubani [3] asked "Can Asians think?" in his popular book of the same title, his answer was more cautious than Mignolo's. Mahbubani argued that even though we may be witnessing the decline of the West and the rise of Asia, recent historical developments may be read as reflecting the superiority of Western intellect over Eastern intellect. He based this on the claim that in recent centuries, the West has been at the forefront of humanity's progress and has outpaced all other civilisations in terms of economic development and geopolitical dominance. Mahbubani wrote:

Can Asians think? Judging from the record of Asian societies over the past few centuries, the answer should be "no"—or, at best, not very well... Societies that take centuries to wake up cannot be said to think very well. It would be foolish for any Asian to deny this painful historical fact. [3] (p. 13)

This article confronts the same question that Mignolo and Mahbubani dealt with, but in the slightly revised version of: "Can East Asian students think?". This unfortunate question is premised on a highly problematic generalisation that a neat distinction can be made between "East Asians" and "Westerners" even though such socially constructed categorisations are Orientalist projections which obscure the complexity of human identification and overlook the intricacies of the way that human societies converge and diverge. In this article, I continue to reluctantly deploy "East Asian" and "Western" because, as will be demonstrated, there is a common tendency within Western higher education for East Asian students to be imagined as intellectually deficient, especially in comparison to Western students (who are typically racialised as white). This surfaces when East Asian students are depicted as lacking in critical thinking skills compared to Western students, which is a widespread perception in Western academia. This stereotype persists even though critical thinking is notoriously difficult to define, cannot be easily measured, and may manifest in culturally specific ways. Thus, this article builds on the suggestion that the widespread perception of East Asian students as lacking in critical thinking skills is a "myth", as Rear [4] has explained:

> There is, on the whole, a distinct lack of evidence to suggest that Asian learners have a negative attitude towards critical thinking or that there are significant differences in dispositions between them and their Western peers . . . If there is little or no empirical evidence that Asian learners lack either critical thinking dispositions or skills compared to Western students and that, in fact, the opposite appears to be true, why is the image of Asian students as weak in critical thinking so prevalent? [4] (pp. 119–120)

In seeking to answer the question raised by Rear, this article interrogates the ways in which East Asian students are depicted as lacking in critical thinking skills in academic publications, by identifying, analysing and deconstructing a reoccurring discourse that appears about East Asian students with reference to Edward Said's framework of Orientalism [1]. The persistence of Orientalist views about East Asian students is so widespread that I also suggest that Orientalism may be found amongst East Asian academics and students, who may suffer from an "internalised Orientalism". Finally, this article seeks to refute the Orientalist stereotyping of East Asian students, which is especially important because the consequences of such narratives can be substantial given that critical thinking is arguably the most celebrated skill that determines who is admitted to universities and who succeeds within them. Given that Said related Orientalism to "ethnocentric race prejudice" [1] (p. 149), and given that it has been suggested that "stereotyping international students, especially the Chinese learner, as remedial amounts to a form of cultural racism" [5] (p. 359), this article also situates itself as contributing toward the ongoing efforts to achieve what Tate and Bagguley [6] have called "the anti-racist university". This, as they explain, involves, firstly, recognising that universities are not "post-racial", and secondly, taking sincere steps to redress the ethnic inequalities that remain within higher education. Other commentators refer to this quest to find new ways of imagining higher education as decolonising the university.

2. The Decolonial Project

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness that "coloniality has survived colonialism not only in the economic, social, and cultural arena but also in academia" [7] (p. 79). This perception, which notes that coloniality continues to shape knowledge production and hierarchies within academia, has led to the intensification of calls to decolonise the university [8–12]. As I have explained elsewhere, the decolonial project within academia has a number of facets which attempt to undo the marginalisation of scholars, scholarship and students who are peripheral in academia due to a colonial hangover which has resulted in a continued stigmatisation and exclusion along the lines of ethnicity, nationality and/or language [13] (pp. 14–16). Those who aim to decolonise universities typically ask a range of related questions, such as: a) Why is non-Anglophone scholarship not given the same prestige as material that is published in English? b) Why do university curricula and research agendas sacrifice non-Western knowledge and contexts in favour of Westerncentric ones? c) Why are ethnic minority

scholars consistently under-represented at senior levels of universities? d) Why is there an attainment gap between ethnic minority students and ethnic majority students? e) Why do ethnic minorities have to endure racism and xenophobia on university campuses? In answering these questions, scholars have emphasised that Western academia is characterised by such an intensity of racism and white privilege that ethnic minorities routinely experience campuses as sites of interrogation, marginalisation and discrimination, which typically materialises as incessant microaggressions but can also take more aggressive and overt forms [14–18].

While the existing decolonial literature is valuable in furthering our understanding of how coloniality continues to operate in Western higher education, it is lacking in two significant ways which I seek to address in this article. Firstly, it tends to overlook the treatment and experiences of East Asian students in Western higher education. This is a major omission, not only because East Asian students are often the largest group of ethnic minority students in Western universities, but also because they may be perceived and treated in unique ways that differ from other ethnic minorities. This is because, while there are commonalities in the way that ethnic minorities encounter prejudice in Western universities, there are also specificities due to the way in which different ethnic minorities have their own nuanced intersectional identities [19]. Secondly, the existing decolonial literature does not often utilise Edward Said's theory of Orientalism [1]. This is unfortunate because Said provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how centuries of pseudo-scholarship and popular narratives have constructed, naturalised and imposed a simplistic hierarchy whereby the West, Western culture, and (white) Western people are imagined to be superior to all others who are dehumanised through generalisations about them as naturally deficient, backward and uncivilised. This is relevant to the decolonial project because such Orientalist attitudes can still be found within academia today. This is despite there being, what I have called elsewhere, a "myth of academic tolerance" which suggests that Western universities are inclusive and enlightened spaces [20]. The continued presence of Orientalism in Western universities should come as no surprise given that Said noted that "academic Orientalism" and "an Orientalized social-science jargon" played a key role in legitimising and professionalising Orientalism through offering a more secular, rational and refined Othering. In order to address these two limitations of decolonial scholarship, this article focuses on the Orientalist perceptions of East Asian students in Western higher education. This discourse can be located within a genre of academic literature about East Asian students which will be scrutinised more closely in the following section.

3. Orientalism, East Asian Students and Critical Thinking

Within the minimal literature that exists about East Asians' experiences in Western academia, there is an understanding that they are subject to unique forms of racism and xenophobia, such as being negatively stereotyped as exotic foreigners who are self-segregating, intellectually incompetent, and poor at communicating [21–24]. East Asian students may be so stigmatised that even Western students with East Asian heritage may adopt negative stereotypes about them which reveals just how entrenched prejudices towards East Asian students can be in Western universities [16] (pp. 65–69). Elsewhere, I have shown how East Asian students are regularly patronised, resented and stigmatised in Western higher education, especially in relation to their supposed lack of intellectual competence, their alleged susceptibility to plagiarism and their presumed negative impact on the educational environment in Western higher education [20]. Academic publications about the internationalisation of higher education are a particularly instructive source for illustrating how East Asian students are perceived in Western academia and it is this literature that I now turn my attention toward so as to offer a decolonial interpretation of it. This body of scholarship is largely written by Western academics who explore the implications of the growing number of East Asian students who are studying in Western universities. While some of this literature celebrates the benefits of internationalisation, such as the pedagogical opportunities that it offers, it is perhaps more often characterised by a tendency to view internationalisation as unsettling, and even burdensome, for Western institutions, academics and students. The specific focus on East Asian students is common due to the relatively large numbers of

East Asian students in Western universities, which results in the resentment toward internationalisation being intertwined with a resentment toward East Asian students, who may be seen as symbolising a neoliberal internationalisation. There are some valid concerns within this literature, which are not always fuelled by Orientalism, such as the questions which are asked about the way in which Western universities may prioritise profitmaking over high quality education. Where the literature becomes more concerning, including in recent publications, is the frequent pattern of questioning East Asian students' critical thinking abilities (e.g., [25–32]). This perception, which is persistent within academia beyond these publications, tends to suggest that East Asian students struggle to: grasp alternative perspectives; think beyond common sense; and challenge the status quo. While it is not entirely unreasonable to suggest that East Asian students may face some common challenges in their pursuit of education in Western universities, this specific discourse, which suggests that East Asian students struggle with critical thinking, is commonly presumed to be true for all East Asian students. While some East Asian students may find expressing critical thinking verbally or in written form challenging (like other students), the literature often generalises this as the default characteristic of all or most East Asian students in a way that is supposedly not the case for other students. This is not only a poorly substantiated generalisation which is often based on stereotyping, but it can have serious ramifications for the way in which East Asian students are treated within Western higher education. In this regard, this discourse about East Asian students could be understood as reifying a "hierarchy of credibility" which is rooted in a colonial categorisation which views white/Western students as "epistemically trustworthy" and as having "epistemic competencies" in a way that is not extended to non-white/non-Western students who are imagined as having much less to offer [33] (pp. 316–318). This narrative may be projected onto various ethnic minorities in Western academia, but it is frequently levelled at East Asian students, and especially toward Chinese students who make up the bulk of East Asian students in Western universities. While there have been some notable attempts in recent years to refute the stigmatisation of East Asian students (e.g., [4,5,20,34–37]), there has not yet been a comprehensive analysis of how the representations of East Asian students as lacking in critical thinking are potentially underpinned by Orientalism [1]. In what follows, I offer an analysis of academic publications about East Asian students and argue that there are six ways in which much of this literature can be understood as perpetuating Orientalist visions of East Asian students.

Firstly, within this literature, scholars who claim to be objective construct a reality which is arguably more a result of their cultural ethnocentrism than the reality of that which is depicted. In doing this, commentators may assemble the Orient and Orientals as they wish to imagine them through a process of what Said called "Orientalizing". This projection of one's own prejudices often means that the voices of East Asian students are excluded from publications about them because some seem to believe that "only the Orientalist can interpret the Orient, the Orient being radically incapable of interpreting itself" [1] (p. 289). In this regard, some commentators may invent an exoticised fantasy of the Orient and Orientals, or as Said called it, "a simulacrum of the Orient", "an imaginary Orient" and a "supreme fiction" which results in defining what East Asian students are and the limits of what they can become. For instance, in one of the most influential contributions to discussions about East Asian students' critical thinking which is still regularly cited today, Atkinson [38] argues that critical thinking is an implicit cultural norm which subconsciously appears in some cultures (conveniently his own) and is suppressed or even absent in others. Despite insufficient evidence being offered to support this premise, Atkinson mentions that it may not be possible to teach critical thinking to students who are from cultures that he thinks do not possess critical thinking. In his own words, he wrote:

> Critical thinking is cultural thinking. Thus, I have suggested that critical thinking may well be in the nature of a social practice—discoverable if not clearly self-evident only to those brought up in a cultural milieu in which it operates, however tacitly, as a socially valued norm. [38] (p. 89)

So routine are perceptions of East Asian students as struggling with critical thinking that, when three responses to Atkinson's article were published, the responses were largely welcoming of Atkinson's contribution, and instead of focusing on his potential ethnocentrism, the respondents prioritised what some may find to be relatively trivial issues like the definition of critical thinking and practical strategies for teaching it, rather than issuing the enthusiastic rebuttal that the original article arguably deserved [39–41]. Those who believe that East Asian students lack critical thinking skills could benefit from being more mindful of how their cultural positionality, or "strategic location" as Said called it, may have tainted their perceptions, as Said explains:

> No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of a society. These continue to bear on what he does professionally, even though naturally enough his research and its fruits do attempt to reach a level of relative freedom from the inhibitions and the restrictions of brute, everyday reality . . . For if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second. [1] (pp. 10–11)

Secondly, within this literature, commentators appear to make simplistic generalisations about a diverse group of people which obscures their complexity and diversity. For instance, there are moments when "East Asian culture" is totalised as "a culture that does not value critical questioning and having inconsistent viewpoints" [28] (p. 175). This may equate to, what Said referred to as "cultural generalization" and "Orientalist generalizations", about which he wrote: "We are immediately brought back to the realization that Orientalists, like many other early-nineteenth-century thinkers, conceive of humanity either in large collective terms or in abstract generalities. Orientalists are neither interested in nor capable of discussing individuals" [1] (p. 154). Generalisations about East Asian students are still routine in academic publications even though commentators have been trying to draw attention to the diversity which exists amongst East Asian students for many years (e.g., [42]). The crudeness of generalising about East Asian students as being deficient in critical thinking becomes more apparent if one considers how the allegation sounds if a synonym for critical thinking would be used (e.g., "East Asians lack advanced thinking") or if it were claimed that East Asians lack other traits which can be considered as universal (e.g., "East Asians are not good at problem solving"). These generalisations are premised on what Said refers to as an "imaginative geography" which codify "us" and "them" in an arbitrary manner. To quell this, Said wished to unsettle what he called the "ontological stability" of the categories of East and West, or "Orient" and "Occident", given the extreme limitations in classifying the world into such reductive binary camps. Thus, he argued that "the Orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely there, just as the Occident itself is not just there either... such locales, regions, geographical sectors as "Orient" and "Occident" are man-made" [1] (pp. 4–5). Yet, such categories are rarely doubted in scholarship about East Asian students' critical thinking. Instead, they are often reified by considering East Asian students and Western students as unproblematically distinct groups. Rather than claim that there is an alternative and desirable Oriental essence which can be captured and conveyed, Said wished to replace such redundant claims with a more nuanced understanding that recognises the limitations of making sweeping generalisations about diverse groups of people, and he emphasised the importance of recognising the commonalities that exist between different societies given that "cultures and civilizations are so interrelated and interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simply delineated description of their individuality" [1] (pp. 348–349).

Thirdly, within this literature, those who construct East Asian students as lacking in critical thinking may draw upon historic tropes which have evolved in academia, politics and popular culture for several centuries. This is made possible because, for centuries, non-Western people have

been "under the gaze of Western imperialism and Western science" [43] (p. 39). More specifically, the perception of Orientals as lacking in critical thinking could echo an antiquated view of "an inherent Oriental disdain for the idea, for mental discipline, for rational interpretation" [1] (p. 253). This motif appears to be evident in statements such as the following: "Western students see understanding as a sudden insight, while Chinese students see understanding as a long process that requires considerable mental effort" [44] (p. 191). Such a statement could be interpreted as reminiscent of Lord Cromer's comments found in the epigraph of this article which may suggest that historic perceptions of Orientals remain as it is still imagined that "their disordered minds fail to understand what the clever European grasps immediately" [1] (p. 38). In this regard, suggesting that East Asian students lack critical thinking seems to mirror historic perceptions of non-Westerners who were dehumanised through depictions of them as indolent, backward and unable to produce useful knowledge [2,45]. This has been explained by Smith who has recounted the demeaning way that non-Westerners have been imagined over the centuries:

> One of the supposed characteristics of primitive peoples was that we could not use our minds or intellects. We could not invent things, we could not create institutions or history, we could not imagine, we could not produce anything of value, we did not know how to use land and other resources from the natural world, we did not practice the "arts" of civilization. [43] (p. 25)

They may not realise it, but Said may suggest that those who claim East Asian students are lacking in critical thinking skills may be informed by an ancient Christian ontology which demarcated believers from heathens, which was secularised over the centuries, passing through a phase of racial taxonomies, until reaching cultural distinctions whereby the supposed differences between Western students and East Asian students come to be justified as objective and empirical observations. This can also involve what Said called a "strategic formation", whereby groups of texts with similar biases and assumptions inform one another to reinforce particular discourses, as he explains: "Every writer on the Orient assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies" [1] (p. 20). These strategic formations can escalate into a cyclical process which results in what Said refers to as a "textual attitude" whereby perceptions about reality are informed by biased and misleading texts rather than what actually happens in society. In other words, scholarship which claims that East Asian students lack critical thinking ability may not only be informed by, but may also justify, such attitudes in society at large, as well as such attitudes in other scholarship.

Fourthly, within this literature, the Other may be depicted in an inferior manner compared to its Western equivalent, whereby the Oriental is potentially viewed as emotional and primitive and the Westerner as objective and rational. Thus, questions are asked about whether those who are from cultures that lack critical thinking (supposedly East Asians) can ever achieve the levels of critical thinking as those who have critical thinking inculcated in their upbringing (supposedly Westerners) [46] (p. 135). The positive representation of the West surfaces in moments when the West is portrayed as the custodian of critical thinking through claims that critical thinking "is very much a Western cultural product ... [and that] critical thinking, as we know it in the West, is not universal" [47] (pp. 80–81). Conversely, for non-Western students, particularly East Asian students, critical thinking is said to be "foreign" as the title of this publication makes abundantly clear—"*Critical Thinking: Teaching Foreign Notions to Foreign Students*" [47]. In this regard, while one can find plenty of academic publications which problematise the presence of East Asian students in Western universities and their "Oriental backwardness", as Said put it, it is much rarer to find academic publications which celebrate their strengths, which corresponds with Said's observation that "Orientalist generalizations about [Orientals] are very detailed when it comes to itemizing [Oriental] characteristics critically, far less so when it comes to analyzing [Oriental] strengths" [1] (p. 310). This also relates to the tendency for Orientalist depictions to define the West in contradistinction to the Orient by way of saying that the West is all that the Orient is not, and vice versa, or, in the simplest terms, that ""We" are this, "they"

are that" [1] (p. 237). For instance, Atkinson [38] (pp. 80–81) seems to reinforce this Orient–West dichotomy when he argues that critical thinking is found in the West due to the individualism that he believes characterises Western civilisation whereas it is not found in East Asia because of the collectivism that he thinks is common there. Indeed, Atkinson is not alone in seemingly constructing "East Asian culture" as being the diametric opposite of "Western culture" (e.g., [48]). This binary codification often parallels a hierarchical ranking, along the following lines: "The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, "normal"" [1] (p. 40). Such depictions are often naturalised by reference to innate attributes and characteristics – or "biological determinism" or "immutable origins" as Said mentioned—such that one can never escape one's essence, because "no matter how much a single Oriental can escape the fences placed around him, he is first an Oriental, second a human being, and last again an Oriental" [1] (p. 102). Thus, critical thinking has been considered as so natural to Western students that it has even been described as a form of "commonsense" that Western students inherently possess [38] (p. 73).

The distinction made between West and Orient is also projected onto education more generally, whereby one finds embellished claims that membership of "UK universities involves rigorous debate, an aggressive search for truth and a discerning of error, bias and contradiction" [49] (p. 17). This sounds appealing but it may offer an idealistic and inflated view of Western higher education which does not acknowledge that Western universities have long had their own problems with academic freedom, political brinkmanship, personal crusades, student disengagement and political correctness [50] (p. 121). Moreover, even though Western universities promise critical thinking to students, particularly international students, the neoliberal tenor of Western universities may have stifled criticality in Western universities and replaced it with a greater focus on "employability", "industry skills" and "authentic assessments" [51,52] (pp. 30–32; p. 420). Thus, those of us who were educated in Western educational institutions will testify that our teachers did the best that they could with what they had in front of them, but that we did not experience utopian educational environments, and it is merely an Orientalist fantasy to imagine Western higher education as the epicentre of relentless critical thinking. The celebration of Western education is often accompanied by a dismissal of East Asian education which fits a pattern whereby East Asian institutions are derided. For instance, Okada [27] argues that Japanese education stifles critical thinking and implies that this can only be rectified by a greater engagement with Western styles of education. Thus, while Western universities are often seen as spaces of enlightenment, East Asian education is usually imagined in derisory ways because, as we are told, "maintaining harmony and avoiding offence or confrontation appear to be of greater value in East Asian cultures than is the search for absolute truth" [49] (p. 17). Jin and Cortazzi [53] (p. 38) sought to capture "the contrast between Chinese and British cultures of learning" by offering the common generalisation that Western education seeks to develop individual confidence, independence, collaboration and creativity whereas East Asian education focuses on memorisation, repetition and recital at the expense of critical thinking and creativity. While they did not state that they consider one approach as superior to another, it is obvious to many of us which type of skills are considered as more desirable in the contest between, for instance, memorisation versus creativity, or repetition versus criticality. While Western education may outperform Eastern education in some measures, on some occasions, these depictions, which appear to flatter the West at the expense of the Orient, do not only homogenise the West, but they may also be interpreted as fixing the Other as a static object which can never adapt or evolve. This constructs "the Orient as something whose existence is not only displayed but has remained fixed in time and place for the West" [1] (p. 108). Thus, perceptions of East Asian students or education may be so engrained that, for some, they may not be willing to reconsider stereotypes about East Asian students because they consider them as unquestionable truths, even if empirical observations or rational arguments hint otherwise. Yet, Said was clear that his preference was not to replace negative stereotypes of Orientals with positive ones, but rather to say that all such stereotypes should be doubted, which is why we must note the range of realities that exist which mean

that some East Asian students (like other students) do struggle with critical thinking and are from educational backgrounds that did not adequately prepare them for higher education [50,52,54,55].

Fifthly, within this literature, the scholar who identifies the inadequacies of the Other may position themselves as having the authority and attributes to diagnose and rectify the supposed deficiencies of the Other, or to put it another way, to civilise them. This is premised on a belief that "[t]he West is the actor, the Orient a passive reactor. The West is the spectator, the judge and jury, of every facet of Oriental behavior" [1] (p. 109). When found in academic research, this approach can be considered as "research through imperial eyes" for its overconfidence in Western rationality's ability to holistically define the world, especially the perpetual problems of the Other, and a sense of self-entitlement to declare ownership over these matters and the solutions to them [43] (p. 56). In this regard, some may believe that Western academia is the sole proprietor of rationality, objectivity and advanced thinking. Thus, Orientalists affix their gaze on the Orient in a way that Orientals would never be permitted to do in return, with the corollary being that Orientalists construct "the Orient as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption" [1] (p. 206). In one particularly striking instance, Atkinson calls for Western educators to rearrange their relationship with East Asian students to "an expert-novice (or master-apprentice) relationship, [where] the learner is as much socialized into a particular worldview (operating on a particular content domain) as taught particular ways to think" [38] (pp. 87–88). Although this seems to contradict Atkinson's suggestion that critical thinking cannot be taught to those whom are from cultures where critical thinking is imagined to be absent, in this instance, Atkinson could be interpreted as depicting Western academics like himself as "saviour academics" who can rescue East Asian students after stipulating what they are lacking on account of the fact that "as they spoke and behaved, he observed and wrote down" [1] (p. 160). On a separate occasion, Atkinson reassures readers of his own critical thinking ability, as he informs us: "As someone brought up squarely in this particular social practice [of critical thinking], I admit to operating naturally and comfortably within it" [46] (p. 135). Not only may this glorify Western subjects with the Orientalist mantra of: "As thinkers we are better off than they are" [1] (p. 47), but it may also patronise East Asian students by depicting them as dependent on enlightened Western educators in a way that Western students are supposedly not. It is also ironic given that a common explanation as to why East Asian students supposedly lack critical thinking is "the teacher's guru-like role of absolute authority and knowledge in [East Asia]" [49] (p. 17). Said may say that, like others, Atkinson implies that East Asian students will flounder if they follow East Asian teachers too closely, whereas an intellectual awakening can be achieved if they pay close attention to "the White Man's expert tutelage" [1] (p. 245). In moments when Western scholars act as "translators" who can explain the Other, and as "heroes" who can rescue the Other, they seem to position themselves as having the ability to speak on behalf of the Other, as Said explained:

> If [the Orientalist] does not speak directly for the Orientals, it is because they after all speak another language; yet he knows how they feel since he knows their history, their reliance upon such as he, and their expectations. Still, he does speak for them in the sense that what they might have to say, were they to be asked and might they be able to answer, would somewhat uselessly confirm what is already evident: that they are a subject race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves. [1] (pp. 34–35)

Orientalists may pursue the redemption of Orientals by seeking to "Westernise" Orientals, or to put it another way, "to vaccinate Asia against its own illnesses, to occidentalize the Orientals" [1] (p. 245). That academics may be complicit in this recalls the historic and continued ways in which universities have been key colonial and neo-colonial institutions used to "civilise" the Other [11] (pp. 6–7).

Sixthly, within this literature, what appear as positive or inclusive depictions of the Other could still reinforce patronising or degrading stereotypes. For instance, when Egege and Kutieleh warn against ethnocentrism and stereotyping but go on to infer that valuable alternatives to critical thinking

may exist in non-Western cultures and propose that East Asian students should be inducted into critical thinking "without making the student feel academically or culturally deficient" [47] (p. 77), they may unwittingly be essentialising East Asian students and presuming that critical thinking is a Western asset that barely, if at all, manifests in East Asia. Similarly, Durkin [49] shows concern for East Asian students and condemns ethnocentrism and stereotyping but still goes on to infer that critical thinking is undervalued in East Asian culture which means that East Asian students are not as good at it as Western students. Thus, although some commentators may be sympathetic to East Asian students and have their wellbeing in mind when they suggest things such as it being undesirable to insist on East Asian students learning critical thinking because it would be tantamount to imposing Western ideals onto East Asian students (e.g., [26,51,52]), these commentators may still inadvertently perpetuate Orientalist discourses. This relates to what Said referred to as "Romantic Orientalism" whereby the Other is still generalised as different even if there is a semblance of positivity offered about them. Said still found such "admiration" problematic given that he believed it still created the conditions for denigration to follow: "Yet almost without exception such overesteem was followed by a counterresponse . . . A swing of the pendulum in one direction caused an equal and opposite swing back" [1] (p. 150). This may be why it is common within the literature about East Asian students for scholars to "acknowledge the dangers of stereotyping but nevertheless often proceed to do precisely that" [54] (p. 46). Thus, one can find publications which, on the one hand, warn against "making cultural assumptions about learning behaviour that may be overly reductionist and stereotypical" and suggest that "teaching staff should endeavour to avoid stereotyping individuals and groups" but which, on the other hand, accept "the existence of culture-specific learning styles" in which essentialised generalisations appear to be made about the supposed differences between Western and East Asian students/education [56] (pp. 684–685). In other instances, although Chen and Buell [57] note that East Asian students are often stereotyped as being proficient at STEM disciplines which may seem like a positive stereotype, it cannot be separated from the inverse perception that East Asian students struggle with critical thinking given that STEM subjects are imagined to be fields that do not require critical thinking in the same way that arts, humanities and social sciences do. Furthermore, Romantic Orientalism may be in operation when the economic benefits of East Asian students are emphasised, which, following Said's analysis, should not be considered as a celebration of the Other, but an objectification which defines the Other in terms of how "we" can benefit from "them". What becomes evident here is that Orientalist depictions of East Asian students can manifest in various guises, including, and perhaps especially in, inconspicuous forms which appear innocent, but which are arguably even more perilous for the very reason that they are misunderstood as harmless, and because these may be the most common forms of Orientalism in academia today.

These six characteristics of academic publications which depict East Asian students as lacking in critical thinking show how Said's theory of Orientalism can be useful for understanding common perceptions of East Asian students in Western universities today. However, where Said's framework is less helpful, is his argument that Orientalist depictions construct the Other as a threat. Although there is a somewhat xenophobic discourse that suggests that East Asian students are a national security threat due to their potential to act as agents for the Chinese state [37,58,59], it is not common for academic publications to relate East Asian students' supposed lack of critical thinking with a "Yellow Peril", even though some academics have construed East Asian students' supposed lack of critical thinking as an indirect threat to the educational integrity of Western universities [20]. Another way in which Said's framework is not entirely applicable is in relation to his argument that Orientalism is typically a deliberate plot which is orchestrated to tame the Orient in the interests of domination, exploitation and imperialism. It would be fanciful to suggest that academic publications which portray East Asian students as deficient in critical thinking are part of an orchestrated conspiracy to subvert the Other, even if other forms of Orientalism in other instances may serve such a function. Rather, for the most part, Orientalist perceptions of East Asian students in academia may be more appropriately understood as unwitting, unintentional or subconscious prejudices which are more to do with bias,

misunderstanding, ignorance or even an ironic lack of critical thinking, rather than geopolitics. In this regard, I do not wish to demonise the authors of academic publications which claim that East Asian students struggle with critical thinking as "Orientalists-cum-imperial agents" [1] (p. 196). Neither do I want to claim immunity from such prejudices myself, given how widespread they are within academia beyond a handful of academics who publish their writing on such themes, and given how those who claim to oppose Orientalism can actually be complicit in reproducing it [60] (pp. 46–47). Rather, one may consider the Orientalism which has been identified in academic publications about East Asian students as what Said referred to as "latent Orientalism" as opposed to "manifest Orientalism", the former of which involves a subtle bias which is informed by Orientalist discourses which have accumulated over the centuries.

4. Internalised Orientalism

The answer that Smith gave to the question: "What happens to research when the researched become the researchers?" [43] (p. 183) was rather optimistic. Her response was: "When [ethnic minorities] become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, people participate on different terms" [43] (p. 193). While this is true in many instances, there are other moments when ethnic minority academics may reproduce undesirable discourses about their own communities. In relation to Orientalism, critics of Said have suggested that he did not give enough attention to the way in which Orientals can also be Orientalist [60] (p. 40). While it would be true to say that Said did not focus on Orientals' responses to Orientalism in any great detail, he did recognise a spectrum of Oriental responses to Orientalism, from resisting it, to failing to refute it, to even reproducing it. Said described those Orientals who facilitated Orientalism as "self-incriminating" and as giving "Oriental consent" which he related to "an intellectual acquiescence in the images and doctrines of Orientalism... the modern Orient, in short, participates in its own Orientalizing" [1] (p. 325). This tendency may also be found in academic publications that are written by East Asian scholars who may perpetuate the narrative that East Asian students have a tenuous relationship with critical thinking. Thus, "the Westerncentrism that dominates the social sciences is not just a result of Western academics' insularity but is also due to non-Western academics' acquiescence" [61] (p. 233). At times, this can be offered in tones that are possibly even more enthusiastic than can be found in scholarship produced by non-East Asians, as the examples below may illustrate:

> It is important to deal with one of the most common problems many Chinese postgraduates encounter, particularly in the arts, humanities and social sciences, which is that they tend to under-perform in and struggle to adapt to the use of critical thinking and discursive and debating skills expected by their courses. Of course, critical thinking is also challenging to many Western students... But the difficulties faced by Chinese students are of a different order... [Chinese students] seem to be unfamiliar with and confused about the concept of critical thinking and have difficulty applying it in their studies. [31] (pp. 857–858)

Here, the key traits of Orientalism which were articulated in the previous section appear to be present again, as the author seems to construct an objective reality based on subjective generalisations which correspond with historic stereotypes which imply that Orientals are inferior to Westerners. In a similarly, and possibly more simplistic and generalised assessment of East Asian students, Hu [62] (p. 85) suggests that East Asian students have "a deficiency in rational thinking" which almost evokes a biological discourse of an illness which needs to be cured. He explains this in more detail as follows:

> One of the major challenges in teaching political science in Asia is that students tend to lack critical thinking ability as displayed by Western students. This is true as well in other social science subjects... most Asian students come to the classroom to do little more than take lecture notes. They seldom challenge the opinions of their professors. Professors often find

that their students' research papers offer more fact-compiling than theoretical effort... The lack of critical thinking ability is one of the major impediments for Asian students to achieve a higher academic standard in social science. [62] (p. 81)

This resembles common tropes about East Asian students, which are that they are passive learners who are good at taking lecture notes but do not challenge their teachers. Presuming that we can generalise all East Asian students as being uniquely like this, which we cannot, it is unclear why this is understood as reflecting an inability to engage in critical thinking given that taking good notes and being reserved are not antithetical to critical thinking. One wonders whether Western students who take notes diligently would also be perceived as lacking critical thinking or whether they would be seen as demonstrating critical thinking through being proactive in capturing knowledge, especially since it has been claimed that when Western students ask questions it demonstrates their inquisitiveness but when East Asian students ask questions it reflects regurgitation [53] (p. 49). Furthermore, a presumptuous glorification of Western students does not recognise that Western students' assessments can often be descriptive and non-theoretical too. In both quotations above, an Orientalist celebration of Western students and a denigration of East Asian students could be said to be present, even though the statements are provided by East Asian scholars whom one may expect to be more familiar with the diversity of talent and potential amongst East Asian students.

East Asian academics who promote the idea that East Asian students lack critical thinking may suffer from an "internalised Orientalism" which means that they accept and endorse Orientalist stereotypes about their own "race", culture or community. To put it another way, they may be said to have a "captive mind", meaning that they suffer from an "inferiority complex" due to being beholden to an outlook informed by coloniality rather than being prepared to creatively reject such dominant discourses [63,64]. These academics may play the role of "the academic native informant" who is expected to participate in a "racialised spectacle" which reveals the maladies of their community [65] (pp. 150–151). This echoes Said's analysis:

The predictable result of all this is that Oriental students (and Oriental professors) still want to come and sit at the feet of American Orientalists, and later to repeat to their local audiences the clichés I have been characterizing as Orientalist dogmas. Such a system of reproduction makes it inevitable that the Oriental scholar will use his American training to feel superior to his own people because he is able to "manage" the Orientalist system; in his relations with his superiors, the European or American Orientalists, he will remain only a "native informant". And indeed this is his role in the West, should he be fortunate enough to remain there after his advanced training. [1] (pp. 323–324)

Thus, East Asian scholars who perpetuate Orientalist discourses about East Asian students may be engaging in what Fanon described when he wrote about insecure ethnic minorities reproducing prejudicial tropes about their own community to acquire membership into "the white world" or "the white sanctuary" [66] (p. 51). Alatas identified a similar phenomenon in Asia and went on to criticise those who exhibit such traits as follows: "They spend their time trying to be acceptable and trying to gain approval from the group whom they look up to. This is a very well known and general trend among Asian scholars" [64] (pp. 30–31). Furthermore, East Asian academics who argue that East Asian students lack critical thinking may not have appreciated that they are contributing to sustaining a discourse which also leads to generating doubts about the ability and competency of ethnic minority scholars like themselves [14,15,65]. Alatas has described this in relation to the dominant perception . . .

. . . that significant knowledge can only come from the West. There is the attitude that good books are only written in the West. Those who study economics never bother to find out the thoughts of Asian economic thinkers. Those who study political science never bother to find out what Asian political thinkers had contributed. Those studying philosophy are not interested in how Asians have pursued wisdom. Those who study history do not bother to

know how Asians have conceptualized history. What are the reasons for this? This initial outlook regards Asian intellectual endeavour as irrelevant and outmoded. Useful and genuine knowledge is not to be found there. [64] (p. 27)

This internalised Orientalism is why, even though a better representation of ethnic minority academics in universities may be a worthy cause [8] (p. 2), Western academia will not necessarily be decolonised if the demographic of academic staff is diversified, as ethnic minority staff may still perpetuate Orientalist narratives. In this regard, East Asian scholars should alert themselves to Smith's warning to ensure that they themselves are engaging in critical thinking and are empowering, rather than injuring, their community:

> If [ethnic minorities] write without thinking critically about our writing, it can be dangerous. Writing can also be dangerous because we reinforce and maintain a style of discourse which is never innocent. Writing can be dangerous because sometimes we reveal ourselves in ways which get misappropriated and used against us. Writing can be dangerous because, by building on previous texts written about [ethnic minorities], we continue to legitimate views about ourselves which are hostile to us. [43] (p. 36)

Similar to East Asian scholars, East Asian students may also succumb to internalised Orientalism. While there are instances when East Asian students resist the stereotypes that exist about them [24,33,67], in other instances, they may also accept the stereotypes that either demean East Asians or glorify Westerners [30,68–70]. This manifests in instances such as when East Asian students demonstrate unfavourable views of East Asian educators and have more respect for white educators [71] (p. 118). It also appears when East Asian students request assistance in achieving the elusive critical thinking that they hear about and which they presume that they do not possess [31,47] (p. 866; p. 78). This internalised Orientalism could lead to devastating consequences for East Asian students who may feel as though they are unable to succeed in Western higher education due to their belief that they lack critical thinking. Such a sentiment has been poignantly captured as follows:

> During my time in academia, I have more often than not felt isolated and marginalised. There had always been a feeling that survival needed to resemble keeping my head below the parapet and ensuring that I did not draw attention towards myself. The feelings that accompany these experiences ultimately result in a disposition that "I do not belong here" or "I am not good enough to be here"... Negotiating and grappling with my presence as a Black Male in academia has been difficult because you are reminded through verbal and symbolic occurrences that you are different from your White counterparts in many cases you are perceived as inferior. [72] (p. 162)

Arday's testimony corresponds with the way in which East Asian students may encounter a self-fulfilling prophecy by labelling themselves as uncritical, lowering their aspirations and performing worse than other students because of presuming that this is their destiny. East Asian students may even try to mask their East Asian identity which may lead to psychological distress [73,74]. Some ethnic minorities may even conclude that "non-participation" in higher education is the safest option available to them and abandon universities altogether [65] (pp. 154–155). This is why it has been argued that prejudicial stereotyping "can affect students – diminish their interest in learning, affect their clinical and academic performance, lower their self-esteem and impact future aspirations and goals" [75] (pp. 94–95). Here, it becomes clear that educators must be prepared to take more responsibility for the possibility that any shortcomings in critical thinking found amongst East Asian students may be less a reflection of those students' deficiencies, and more of a reflection of our own pedagogical weaknesses, and even discrimination [27,34,35,69,76]. That is to say that rather than believing that East Asian students struggle to arrive at critical thinking because of a limitation within themselves or their culture, it may be more apt to ask if East Asian students would realise their critical thinking

potential if it were not for the Orientalist labelling that they encounter at the hands of educators. Thus, the ramifications of internalising Orientalism can be wide-ranging and severe which is why Said wished "to illustrate the formidable structure of cultural domination and, specifically for formerly colonized peoples, the dangers and temptations of employing this structure upon themselves or upon others" [1] (p. 25).

5. East Asian Students Can Think!

Thus far, I have demonstrated that there is a common tendency for East Asian students to be imagined as deficient in critical thinking, including by some East Asians, and that such a perception has several characteristics which seems to justify labelling it as Orientalist. In this section, I attempt to contribute to the decolonial project by subverting Orientalist perceptions of East Asian students and demonstrating why it is misplaced to label East Asian students as lacking the ability to think critically. One could reasonably challenge the patronising and denigrating depictions of East Asian students by celebrating East Asian students who study in the West as ambitious and brave individuals, who not only make many sacrifices to achieve their goals, but who show an admirable determination to overcome a range of financial, familial, cultural, and practical hurdles which could have prevented them from completing their studies in Western universities, or even gaining access to those universities in the first place [70]. Yet, the approach that is taken here is less inclined to draw attention to East Asian students' accolades, and instead calls for "de-Orientalising" perceptions of East Asian students as a key component of the decolonial project. Before this can happen, academics, including myself, must commit ourselves to engage in an unsettling level of reflexivity which may lead to conceding that we are involved in reproducing prejudice, even if we like to think of ourselves as progressive and inclusive. Thereafter, we must be prepared to undo such narratives in our behaviour and actions given that "whilst it is easy for academics to declare our anti-racism, whether this translates to our academic conduct is another question" [13] (p. 19). This process may involve a more cautious approach from academics, especially those who publish academic scholarship about East Asian students, who should be more mindful of the manner in which academic research has exoticised, exploited and misrepresented the Other for a long time, and who must try to avoid reproducing this by proactively including, and perhaps even benefiting, but certainly not harming, the ethnic minorities that we research [43]. In this sense, scholars who write about East Asian students must recognise the consequences of their scholarship, as Said explained:

> [Scholars should] be sensitive to what is involved in representation, in studying the Other, in racial thinking, in unthinking and uncritical acceptance of authority and authoritative ideas, in the sociopolitical role of intellectuals, in the great value of a skeptical critical consciousness. Perhaps if we remember that the study of human experience usually has an ethical, to say nothing of a political, consequence in either the best or worst sense, we will not be indifferent to what we do as scholars. [1] (p. 327)

Furthermore, and ironically, academics may also need to admit our own lack of critical thinking in reference to how we perceive the Other. Indeed, Said himself noted the way in which Orientalism is underpinned by a lack of critical thinking given that it "approaches a heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex human reality from an uncritically essentialist standpoint" [1] (p. 333). To further this cause, here I offer five refutations against the claim that East Asian students cannot think critically, which are partly informed by my extensive engagement with students in several East Asian countries in recent years, particularly my sustained experience of teaching in Singapore from 2013 until now.

Firstly, East Asian students are a highly diverse group of individuals with varying levels of dedication, competency and understanding. What this means is, quite simply, that "we ought to be wary of making sweeping judgements about East Asian students and their supposed incapacity for critical thought" [77] (p. 14). For example, there are huge disparities that exist amongst students from East Asia in terms of their personalities, expectations, ambitions, lifestyles and personal circumstances, even if

Orientalist presumptions prevent this from being realised [24,48,58,70]. This means that one cannot even begin to talk of a typical Chinese student, let alone a typical East Asian student. Recognising the diversity and the agency of East Asian students means accepting that East Asian students have just as much critical thinking potential as any other students. This also involves recognising that many Western students have yet to realise critical thinking to any great degree and that they may struggle to question common-sense assumptions as much as any other students [47,55] (pp. 77–78; p. 411). One can further support East Asians' potential for critical thinking by highlighting the existence of innovative scholarship and/or political dissent in East Asia [69,78]. Similarly, the political and economic successes that East Asian countries have achieved in recent decades, and their continuing ascendency, could not have been achieved without an abundance of critical thinking. Alternatively, teaching anecdotes can highlight the existence of critical thinking amongst East Asian students given that those of us who have extensively taught both East Asian and Western students can confidently testify that we have found just as many intelligent, capable and curious students amongst East Asian students as we have found amongst Western students, and more specifically, we can assert that East Asian students certainly can engage in critical thinking as is reflected in many of them being vocal about controversial issues and challenging views that they disagree with [76,79] (pp. 437–438; pp. 713–714). This is why Tran has stated: "From my own teaching experience and my numerous class observations, some Asian students are indeed passive, but many are very active, and some even more critical than their Western classmates" [67] (p. 59). Similarly, Stephens has argued the following:

> My own experience of working with mainland Chinese students has disabused me of more stereotypes than it has supported generalities. Familiarity with any cultural group can reveal individual differences which eventually seem more pronounced than initially perceived or expected similarities. I have found independent-mindedness, liking for argument, cynicism about authority, and individual differences consistent with differing educational experiences and home environments. [50] (p. 121)

Related to recognising the diversity which exists amongst East Asian students, one should also avoid falling into the pitfall of ethnocultural determinism which misunderstands East Asian students as mere products of their culture [34,73,76,78]. Such a view fails to recognise that cultures are complex, and even contradictory, as is evident from the basic observation that there are many instances when reality does not conform to cultural stereotypes. In relation to this, Stephens has explained how the stereotype of an individualistic West and a collectivist Orient could be subverted when she speaks of . . .

> . . . the astonishment of one newly-arrived Chinese student at the orderliness of British society, from the behaviour of drivers on the roads to the tendency to accept authority in the absence of obvious sanctions. This student commented that order in China is maintained in much more explicit and authoritarian ways. He claimed that the rhetoric of this authoritarian order is maintained because individualistic chaos is never far from the surface and concluded that in British society conformity is more thoroughly internalised than in China. [50] (p. 120)

Even if one were to conclude that East Asia is more collectivist than the West, suggesting that this collectivism prevents individual criticality is as redundant as suggesting that Western individualism prevents respect for others. All of this is to say that we must avoid totalising East Asian students with patronising and condescending generalisations that construct them in the mould of "the childish primitive" [1] (p. 247).

Secondly, if East Asian students do not appear as critical thinkers, it could be because of language barriers rather than ability, as trying to demonstrate criticality in any language that is not our native language would be challenging for all of us [4,50,56,69,76]. This may be in relation to vocabulary and grammatical rules, but it could just as well be about a lack of awareness of slang and idioms which are often used in Western educational environments [80] (p. 97). In a significant illustration of the

importance of language, Rear [77] found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that Japanese students exhibit better critical thinking skills when debating in Japanese (their native language) than they do when debating in English (their second language). This demonstrates that, rather than assuming that East Asian students lack critical thinking skills, it could just be that they find it challenging to demonstrate it in a second language. This is to be expected for any student which is why students whose native language is English also struggle to succeed when studying in non-English speaking settings [79] (p. 713). In some instances, even when East Asian students are fluent in Western languages, their accent may be enough to generate the impression amongst some educators that they lack critical thinking skills because of the associations that educators may infer between particular accents and intellectual ability.

Thirdly, East Asian cultural traits may be misunderstood as indicating a lack of critical thinking. For example, East Asian students who express views that are not commonly held in Western societies may be seen as offering uncritical views. This is less to do with the criticality of the viewpoints and more to do with an ethnocentric assessment of what is considered as critical and what is not. It is often said that East Asian students have a cultural tendency to exhibit a humility and deferential respect toward educators which, if it is true, may also be misread as signalling an absence of critical thinking. If East Asian students have such cultural traits, they may be judged as lacking critical thinking skills because educators may believe that "verbal evidence of critical thinking is the surest sign that someone is a critical thinker or that critical thinking has taken place" [38] (p. 84). However, less vocal students should not be presumed to lack critical thinking because "the quiet student who has not spoken in class during the semester may be equally capable of achieving a high score for his or her work. Moreover, this student may have a deeper understanding of the issues discussed than the talkative, assertive student" [55] (p. 413). After interviewing a group of East Asian students about this issue, Tran [67] (pp. 59–60) found that although her participants believed that showing respect for the teacher is important, they did not equate this with not questioning or challenging the teacher. It may also be suggested that rather than look down upon East Asian students' cultural traits as antithetical to robust education, Western institutions and educators should explore the extent to which certain norms, values and behaviours should be incorporated into pedagogical environments in order to enhance those settings. For example, if one were to presume, as is often done, that memorisation, repetition and recital, as well as less aggressive and individualistic debate, are features of East Asian cultures, one may ask whether these qualities should be encouraged in Western higher education too [80] (pp. 92–93). Ultimately, in seeking to avoid ethnocentric judgements about East Asian students, it would be beneficial to adopt a more culturally relativist perspective when it comes to student communication so as to avoid making the mistake of presuming that more reserved students who may prefer rote learning lack critical thinking. At the same time, it is imperative not to simplistically conclude that East Asian students are necessarily shy or timid, as one can find loud and confident East Asian students just as one can find shy and timid Western students.

Fourthly, if East Asian students are not as comfortable expressing their critical thinking as Western students are, it could be because East Asian students may come from political contexts in which authoritarian governments supress critical thinking in pursuit of their own agendas. While one must be careful not to stereotype East Asian countries as devoid of dissent, nor must one stereotype Western countries as not having their own forms of censorship, it is still necessary to recognise how criticality within education may be deliberately deprioritised for political expediency in some East Asian contexts [31]. In such a climate, individuals may self-censor due to a fear of reprisals and the danger of expressing critical thinking could be so real that it may even stifle critical expression when studying in the West. Ironically, such repression of critical thinking in some East Asian contexts may originate in the colonial era given that Western colonial powers deliberately suppressed critical thinking in the colonies which arguably continues to stunt intellectual atmospheres in some postcolonial societies today [81–83]. Aside from a sinister repression of critical thinking, some East Asian states may also repress critical thinking because they may perceive it as a frivolous distraction from a type of education that can be used for economic development, particularly in an era when East Asian countries are

rapidly integrating themselves as key actors in the global economy. Thus, if one does conclude that Western students are better equipped than East Asian students in critical thinking (a premise that this article rejects) one may relate this to the different political and economic contexts of Western and East Asian societies rather than blame it on an innate inferiority of East Asian peoples or cultures.

Fifthly, critical thinking is such a vague and subjective notion that it is not possible to draw conclusions about who is proficient in it. Therefore, it has been stated that "there is currently no agreement among academics about such an apparently crucial concept [critical thinking], yet international students, especially Chinese students, are often judged as lacking this attribute" [54] (p. 44). In a study which interviewed academics about their perceptions of critical thinking, Moore [84] found that despite there being unanimous agreement that critical thinking should be a key feature of a university education, there still exists a wide variation in how academics understand critical thinking. This may be why empirical studies that seek to compare students' critical thinking competencies are inconclusive in determining which students are more adept at it [4,67,77,78] (pp. 118–120; pp. 59, 63–64; p. 3; p. 67). More provocatively, it has even been suggested that rather than doubting East Asian students' critical thinking, academics should be more introspective in asking if we are implementing critical thinking in our own teaching and research, especially given that we are unable to agree upon what it is [5,51] (p. 360; p. 30).

In practical terms, to operationalise these five refutations and to avoid producing "quasi-scholarly knowledge of the Orient" [1] (p. 224), academics need to: 1) stop generalising about East Asian students and recognise their potential; 2) start to appreciate the linguistic challenges that East Asian students may face; 3) develop greater cultural literacy about the cultures of the East Asian students that we teach; 4) be mindful of the political and economic contexts that our East Asian students may come from; and 5) stop pretending that we are the custodians of critical thinking. These measures could help redress the simplistic renderings of East Asian students which are common despite Western academics who hold Orientalist beliefs typically having limited experience and knowledge of East Asian students or educational contexts [36,52] (p. 19; p. 417). This contradiction must be addressed because, despite moments when the Orientalist "blithely confesses to no knowledge of any Oriental language, he is not constrained by ignorance from making sweeping generalizations about the Orient, its culture, mentality, and society" [1] (p. 193). While academics taking individual responsibility by way of radically reconsidering how they teach or write about ethnic minority students is important, there is also a need for Western universities to better prioritise tackling Orientalist narratives at an institutional level [48,54,56,85] (pp. 539–540; p. 51; pp. 685–686; p. 36). Thus, dismantling individuals' biased perceptions of East Asian students must also be accompanied by a structural decolonisation of the university too.

6. Conclusions

This article has sought to make a unique contribution toward the decolonial project by focusing on two relatively neglected themes: East Asian students and Orientalism. This article has identified, analysed and refuted the Orientalist perception of East Asian students as struggling with critical thinking which may be found within academic publications and Western higher education more generally. It has also identified and critiqued the internalised Orientalism which may exist amongst some East Asian academics and students. There remains a need to "de-Orientalise" perceptions of East Asian students which not only means unlearning crude stereotypes that many of us unwittingly possess, but it also means being more thoughtful about how one writes about, teaches and interacts with East Asian students, so as "to liberate intellectuals from the shackles of systems such as Orientalism" [1] (p. 340). Beyond academia, this may also have implications for the way in which Westerners imagine and engage with East Asians more generally, such as in political, cultural, economic and other domains. Indeed, some of the rhetoric about the Covid19 pandemic has often been informed by similar Orientalist themes that have been identified in this article. There also remain questions about East Asian students' perceptions of others, which may result in further awareness of how East Asian students view and treat

other ethnic minority students, or how they may engage in what has been called "reverse Orientalism" whereby they generalise and stereotype the West/Westerners, either positively or negatively [70] (pp. 6–8). This article started by referring to Walter Mignolo's succinct response to the question: "Can non-Europeans think?". It seems appropriate to close with Mignolo's final remarks in his preface which reaffirm his answer to this question: "Yes, we can, and we must. And we are doing so" [2] (p. xlii).

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