

The myth of academic tolerance: the stigmatisation of East Asian students in Western higher education

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the stigmatisation of East Asian students within Western universities. This is necessary because East Asian students are often overlooked in existing literature about racism in Western academia. It is argued that East Asian students may be generalised as undesirable students in ways that resonate with more broadly held prejudices about East Asian people. To illustrate this, academic publications about East Asian students are critiqued. This involves identifying, analysing and deconstructing the stereotypes of East Asian students which inadvertently totalise them as homogenous, inadequate and deficient. More specifically, it is argued that East Asian students are often unfairly depicted as: a) lacking critical thinking skills; b) being prone to plagiarism; and c) harming the educational environment. This article introduces the notion of ‘the myth of academic tolerance’ and calls upon academics and universities to actively resist the stigmatisation of East Asian students.

KEYWORDS

East Asian students; Western universities; internationalisation; international students; higher education; stereotyping; prejudice; racism

Introduction

A man may be a good father and a good husband, a conscientious citizen, highly cultivated, philanthropic, *and* in addition an anti-Semite. He may like fishing and the pleasures of love, may be tolerant in matters of religion, full of generous notions on the condition of the natives in Central Africa, *and* in addition detest the Jews.¹

In January 2019, an academic at a US university was accused of undermining East Asian² culture after his course handbook instructed East Asian students to write their names using Western conventions.³ In the same week, a British university issued an apology after they were accused of racial stereotyping for including the Chinese⁴ translation of ‘cheating’ in an email that they sent to all international students.⁵ Just a few days after these two incidents, an academic at another US university was accused of discrimination after telling East Asian students that they must use English in communal areas.⁶ These three incidents are glimpses at a reoccurring pattern in Western universities⁷ whereby East Asian students may be discreetly patronised, marginalised and ostracised. While there is a growing body of academic literature about racism in Western universities, this scholarship has paid insufficient attention to the way in which East Asian students can also be derided. The objective of this article is to contribute toward addressing this oversight by demonstrating that even though universities are often imagined as inclusive spaces, disparaging attitudes toward East Asian students may still exist. Furthermore, this article aims to offer an original critique of academic publications about East Asian students, by uniquely identifying, analysing and deconstructing the stereotypes of East Asian students in Western academia.

This article is informed by a decolonial theoretical approach which has been popularised in recent years by those who have called for the decolonisation of universities, disciplines and pedagogies.⁸ This theoretical framework can be understood as a synthesis of postcolonialism,

which recognises the continued importance of colonial hierarchies in shaping the present, as well as critical race theory, which seeks to dismantle the socially constructed pervasiveness of racial categorisations and their associated hierarchies. Uniquely though, a decolonial theoretical framework is somewhat more radical in imagining practical alternatives to Westerncentric hegemony. This decolonial project is underpinned by an awareness of the harmful consequences of stigmatising ethnic minority students. For instance, prejudice toward East Asian students could prevent them from gaining access to higher education, or after being admitted to university, it could lead to them encountering hostility, mistreatment and discrimination, even from Western students with East Asian heritage who may engage in a process of ‘intraethnic othering’.⁹ The potential for East Asian students to be disparaged within universities is especially unfortunate given that East Asian students already have to contend with a wide-range of intense challenges outside of campuses which may be invisible to educators, as has been captured by Fong,¹⁰ who has documented how Chinese students face a range of overbearing difficulties, such as: facing excessive pressure from their parents to succeed; being manipulated by study abroad brokers; struggling to obtain visas and having to obey strict immigration regulations; financially struggling due to expensive tuition fees and costs of living; juggling their studies with uninspiring and gruelling employment; living in unsatisfactory and/or overcrowded housing; losing their familial and social networks; having to cope with being in an environment that is culturally alien; being victimised by criminals, and so on. In addition to all of these challenges, East Asian students also have to contend with being represented in negative terms by the mainstream media given that they are often depicted as an alien Other who can be objectified for financial profit but are otherwise burdensome.¹¹

In the next section, I introduce what I call ‘the myth of academic tolerance’, so as to draw attention to the way in which universities can be key sites of exclusion. I also elaborate on why there is a need for more research on the stigmatisation of East Asian students in Western academia. In the section after that, I discuss the synergies that exist between the depictions of East Asian students and the depictions of East Asians more generally. I begin the subsequent section with a brief overview of my critique of academic publications and then introduce some of the problematic patterns which may be found within this genre of literature, such as the tendency for academics to generalise East Asian students as homogenous and to assume the role of ‘the saviour academic’ who can rescue East Asian students from their imagined deficiencies. In the penultimate section, I identify, analyse and deconstruct three specific stereotypes about East Asian students which can be found in academic publications, which suggest that they: a) struggle with critical thinking; b) have a predisposition to plagiarise; and c) weaken the educational environment of Western universities. Finally, I offer a brief conclusion which calls upon academics and universities to ensure that we are empowering ethnic minority students to flourish rather than inadvertently perpetuating a climate in which we patronise, marginalise and exclude them. Given that I cannot claim that I have never subscribed to stereotypes about East Asian students, this call applies to myself as much as to anyone else.

The myth of academic tolerance

In the epigraph at the beginning of this article, Jean-Paul Sartre reminds us that prejudice can be found amongst those whom one may not expect it from. Academics are illustrative of this as even though we may be well-educated, have a cosmopolitan network, and enjoy travelling around the world, we may still hold biases toward ethnic minorities. Yet, there remains a perception that Western universities are post-racial, progressive and inclusive spaces that are inhabited by open-minded individuals.¹² This is exacerbated by the underreporting of racism in Western universities which fosters a misleading impression that racism is appropriately

tamed within them.¹³ While some ethnic minorities may find Western universities *relatively* safe spaces due to campuses typically being amongst the most diverse places in any city or town, since the death of George Floyd in May 2020, there has been an increased awareness of racism in society, including within Western higher education. Although this has generated some welcome (and some superficial) attempts at addressing racism in Western universities, for some time, a thriving body of research has insisted that Western universities are characterised by institutional and everyday racism to such an extent that ethnic minorities often experience campuses as hostile environments in which they have to develop strategies of survival to cope within.¹⁴ The marginalisation of ethnic minorities in Western higher education may appear in the form of stereotyping, interrogation, exclusion and discrimination, which means that ethnic minorities are paradoxically ‘invisible’ and ‘hypervisible’ at the same time owing to the way in which ethnic minorities may be ignored in some instances and scrutinised intensely in others.¹⁵ Thus, Western universities have been understood as places of normative whiteness and white privilege, which is to say that within them, whiteness is normalised and white people are afforded greater opportunities.¹⁶ On most occasions – but not all – as is the case in other spheres, prejudice in Western academia appears as subtle and polite microaggressions such as comments, jokes, stares, and silences, which may seem insignificant to some, but which can accrue over time and cause significant distress.¹⁷ All of this is to say that one should be aware of what I call ‘the myth of academic tolerance’ which erroneously suggests that racism is absent from academia. In fact, as will become evident, academics may succumb to social currents as much as anyone else, which is why ‘it isn’t surprising that racism exists in universities, given that universities are examples of the wider community’.¹⁸ Perhaps it is more surprising, or maybe it is not, that even academics who consider themselves to be progressive and antiracist, and whose scholarly endeavours may even relate to social justice, may not only be uncomfortable in recognising racism in academia, but may even be involved in unknowingly perpetuating it.¹⁹ In this sense, while it may be impossible to find academics who identify as racists, there are still a substantial number of academics who have limited concern about tackling racism, and who may even tacitly subscribe to prejudicial attitudes.

There are two reasons why a focus on East Asian students contributes an important addition to existing scholarship about ethnic minorities in Western academia. Firstly, academic literature has tended to focus on the experiences of ethnic minority staff.²⁰ Scholarship about staff experiences of racism has documented the multiple forms it takes, which includes such things as: having less opportunities for employment and promotion; being under-represented at all levels but particularly at senior levels; being overburdened with work in a discriminatory fashion; being undervalued, doubted or dismissed by management, colleagues and students; having one’s authority undermined; not being adequately supported or mentored; being expected to prove oneself to a greater degree; being expected to comply with the status quo or risk being resented and labelled as troublesome; and generally being ostracised, marginalised and made to feel unwelcome. The consequences of these maltreatments range from having one’s career trajectory curtailed, developing low self-esteem, and triggering mental or physical health issues. The sporadic literature that does exist about ethnic minority students has recognised that, like ethnic minority academics, they suffer routine microaggressions, often feel isolated, and experience marginalisation within Western universities.²¹ The second reason why a focus on East Asian students is necessary is that, thus far, academic literature about ethnic minorities in Western universities has often exclusively focused on those who are racialised as black.²² While one cannot understand racism in Western higher education without scrutinising how black people are viewed and treated within it, other ethnic minorities may have unique experiences which differ from those who are racialised as black, despite there still being overlaps. This is why there is a niche oeuvre of literature that occasionally examines

indigenous/native/aboriginal peoples' experiences of racism in Western higher education.²³ Thus, to further enhance existing literature, there is a need for greater focus on the unique ways in which East Asian students are stigmatised in Western academia, which may have added importance because 'the global hierarchy of higher education' means that East Asian students continue to arrive at Western universities in unprecedented numbers.²⁴

East Asians in the popular imagination

It is instructive to note general perceptions of East Asians because these tropes can inform perceptions of East Asian students. There is a view that East Asians do not face discrimination because they are a 'model minority' who enjoy educational and economic success.²⁵ Yet, East Asians do suffer bigotry in ways that are not dissimilar to other ethnic minorities. This has become strikingly evident during the Covid19 pandemic when the virus was labelled as a 'Chinese virus' which was supposedly caused by East Asians' 'backward', 'dirty' and 'disgusting' culture. This global upsurge of Sinophobia resulted in numerous instances of East Asians who were perceived to be Chinese being boycotted, refused service, verbally abused, threatened and harassed.²⁶ There were also several reports of East Asians being spat at, violently attacked, and hospitalised due to being accused of causing or spreading Covid19.²⁷

The stigmatisation of East Asians did not begin with Covid19 but rather, there has been a long history of negatively stereotyping East Asians in Western contexts. For instance, within popular culture, East Asians have been depicted for centuries in a denigrating manner which has led to them being routinely dehumanised.²⁸ East Asians have more specifically been stereotyped as socially incompetent, poor at communicating, lacking common-sense, and as physically and sexually inadequate.²⁹ Furthermore, they are often stereotyped as 'perpetual foreigners' who can never assimilate and will always be alien to the West.³⁰ Thus, like other ethnic minorities, East Asians are often imagined in the West as an 'Other' whose very essence is one of difference and incompatibility. On occasion, this construction of East Asians as outsiders has escalated to them being represented as a threat as is common with all forms of racialised stereotyping. This manifests, for example, in the cultural icon of the 'Chinese villain' which is a character found within Western popular culture of an East Asian 'evil genius' who cannot be trusted due to their ominous intentions combined with their treacherous use of powerful knowledge.³¹ Kawai³² makes an intriguing connection between the model minority Stereotype and the view of East Asians as a threat by suggesting that the model minority stereotype should not be understood as a positive stereotype, but instead, it should be understood as reflecting a historical suspicion that East Asians are infiltrating and eclipsing the West, also known as 'the Yellow Peril'. The significance of these popular representations of East Asians is that they have remarkable resonance with the stereotypes of East Asian students which will be discussed in this article. In particular, as will become apparent, East Asian students may also be totalised as fundamentally different; beholden to an 'inferior' culture; intellectually inept; and even dangerous. Thus, East Asian students may be imagined in similar ways to which East Asians have more generally been imagined which is based on negative stereotypes about them being distinct, inferior and hazardous.

East Asian students in the academic imagination

Academic publications about East Asian students can be understood as indicative of broader attitudes found in Western academia. This literature focuses on the growing numbers of East Asian students in Western higher education and the unique challenges that this is said to pose. This genre has expanded significantly in the last 15 years and is often characterised by reoccurring themes. This literature may be written by academics who are well-meaning, pleasant and friendly, and even though their scholarship may be open to interpretation, my

analysis suggests that this scholarship may be unwittingly biased toward East Asian students. In this regard, the maligning of East Asian students in this literature is rarely, if ever, deliberate nor ferocious, but it can still have considerable consequences for East Asian students. In the remainder of this article, I will offer an overdue critique which seeks to identify, analyse, and deconstruct some of the common themes found within this literature.

Before considering more specific depictions, it is worth reflecting on some of the more general patterns found within this literature. To begin with, a significant portion of this literature can be understood as being hostile to East Asian students in the sense that it gives the impression that East Asian students are a nuisance who can only be begrudgingly tolerated. Instead of recognising East Asian students' aptitude or potential, this literature may patronise them through imagining them as needy, aloof and confused. Some of this literature objectifies, infantilises and silences East Asian students by *speaking about them* rather than *speaking with them*. This literature rarely recognises the complexities, intricacies and diversity of East Asian students' personalities, perceptions and experiences which can be found in rich ethnographies which give a voice to East Asian students and show that many of them are competent, outgoing, assertive, opinionated, and deserve a large amount of respect for being determined and resilient.³³ This is why it has been claimed that much of the literature about East Asian students is often 'largely based on outmoded and stereotypical assumptions long past their use-by date . . . [and] on entrenched stereotypical views of the characteristics of "Western" and "Chinese" learners'.³⁴ Thus, it would not be unreasonable to describe some of this literature as Orientalist in that it reproduces simplistic, fixed and ethnocentric mythologies about the imagined essence of a distant, different and depraved Other in contradistinction to a supposedly superior Western pinnacle.³⁵ That is not to say that East Asian students must be romanticised, nor to say that they never face common challenges, but rather to call for a greater recognition of the way in which our 'unconscious bias' may inform our perceptions of them.

Some of the authors of this literature appear to consider themselves as what I refer to as 'saviour academics' – or what Preston³⁶ has also referred to as 'the white academic hero' – which are those academics who believe that they can offer definitive guidance about how to resolve 'the problem of the Other'. This is somewhat disconcerting when one considers that most of this literature is produced by white/Western scholars about non-white/non-Western students which is reminiscent of colonial mantras about the importance of 'the White Man's expert tutelage'.³⁷ Thus, it has been suggested that in dealing with East Asian students, some Western academics seem to believe that they are part of a 'civilising mission'.³⁸ Saviour academics may sustain the notion that they can rescue East Asian students from their intellectual slumber, a pattern which has existed since the colonial period, as explained by Syed Hussein Alatas:

This idea of dependence, through tutelage, for [Asia] intellectually, had been taken for granted. It was assumed that people here know less about practically all subjects than people in the West. Once again a parallel exists. In the past the outlook was that the colonies could not maintain themselves. They could not be granted independence because they would ruin the country if they govern themselves. They could not be relied upon to develop the country because they did not have the technical know-how. Now, the parallel with intellectual imperialism is that they do not have the intellectual know-how. Hence the need for a form of indirect tutelage.³⁹

The saviour academics who affix their 'superior' gaze on the 'inferior' East Asian students could be said to undertake 'research through imperial eyes' which has little benefit for those who are researched, and indeed, may even be harmful for them.⁴⁰ A limitation of most of this

literature is the treatment of East Asian students as a homogenous bloc who share the same traits and viewpoints. In this regard, the variations which exist in the attitudes, experiences and cultures of East Asian students are rarely acknowledged. For instance, a substantial section of the literature discusses ‘the Chinese learner’ which is significant for its ontological classification of Chinese students as fitting one mould even though one would rarely talk in equally simplistic terms about ‘the British learner’ or ‘the American learner’. Such a totalising construction has been criticised for implying that ‘a Chinese learner is always and only a Chinese learner’.⁴¹ The crude generalisations that can be found in some of the literature lead to statements which should be reconsidered, such as:

In the context of western university education, reading creates fundamental problems for Chinese students, both in terms of their reliance on the teacher for guidance as to what they should be reading and in terms of the sheer volume of reading recommended by lecturers.⁴²

The above quotation may be no less accurate if one were to remove ‘Chinese’ from it because academic reading is something that students from all backgrounds struggle with. Yet, in this instance, the generalisation is only applied to Chinese students – and to *all* Chinese students no less – which may foster an impression of them as particularly inept.

Elsewhere, one can find other generalisations which suggest things like ‘people from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Mainland China all share the same culture’.⁴³ Such statements do not capture the superdiversity of East Asia whereby, for example, even when East Asian students share the same ethnicity, such as Chinese students from Singapore and Chinese students from China, they may not only not relate to one another but they may even hold negative stereotypes about each other.⁴⁴ Similarly, one can find significant differences between students from Mainland China and students from Hong Kong, even though they are technically from the same country.⁴⁵ In fact, it has been well documented that students from Mainland China and students from Hong Kong typically view each other as so different that, at best, they do not socialise with each other, and at worse, they may be quite hostile towards each other.⁴⁶ Even within Mainland China, one may find significant distinctions between students from urban and rural settings.⁴⁷ Furthermore, there are 55 officially-recognised ethnic minority groups in Mainland China which results in a vast heterogeneity amongst Chinese students who have diverse cultures and experiences.⁴⁸ Moreover, even those Chinese students with similar backgrounds in China experience higher education in different ways given that they are individuals with their own unique identities.⁴⁹ In fact, one can find so much uniqueness amongst East Asian students in terms of their backgrounds, experiences, aspirations, lifestyles, identity, and so on, that it does not even make sense to generalise about East Asian students from the same family, let alone East Asians altogether.⁵⁰

Another way in which East Asian students are often generalised is in the blanket presumption that their journey through Western education is inevitably fraught with ‘culture shock’, unease and difficulty. The struggles that East Asian students are said to succumb to are frequently blamed on East Asian culture which is generalised as a hinderance to East Asian students’ progress. The generalisation that East Asian students are held back by East Asian culture is problematic on many levels, not least because it is, as Song and McCarthy have argued, ‘a form of cultural racism’.⁵¹ It also misunderstands culture as an attribute that one is always uniformly determined by, rather than as a complex, evolving and contradictory set of habits and beliefs which one may embrace in some moments but reject in others. Thus, there is a tendency to presume that East Asian culture is static and overbearing to the extent that some of the literature

about East Asian students has been described as being characterised by ‘a sense of cultural fixity’.⁵² On occasion, Confucianism is specifically highlighted to explain East Asian students’ supposed conformity, passivity and obedience, as appears to be the case in the following passage:

It is evident that Chinese national culture is different to that of other countries. The root of these differences lies in Confucianism. This difference in national culture is reflected in education. Chinese learners are different in that they think differently and as a result have different preferences in terms of learning, teaching and assessment.⁵³

In such instances, East Asian students may be understood as possessing innate tendencies which are predestined by a distinct Confucian influence which is, as emphasised repeatedly here, *different* (from ‘us’). Other commentators have criticised such perspectives as a mischaracterisation of Confucianism and claimed that Confucianism can also be understood as promoting a determined pursuit of knowledge through reflection, questioning and interrogation.⁵⁴ East Asians also have agency which enables them to doubt and resist the multiple forms of hegemony that are projected onto them. Blaming Confucianism in this way, or even East Asian culture more generally, does not only overlook East Asian students’ individuality, but it may also absolve educators and educational institutions from taking responsibility for shaping East Asian students’ experiences, when instead, we should be asking ourselves if we have nurtured a pedagogical environment that is conducive to East Asian students being able to demonstrate their abilities.⁵⁵

Critical thinking, plagiarism and ‘dumbing down’

There are three specific tropes that often appear in academic literature about East Asian students which may unfairly stereotype them. These are the claims that: a) East Asian students lack critical thinking, b) East Asian students are prone to plagiarism, and c) East Asian students diminish the quality of Western higher education. These stereotypes may be interwoven into a holistic narrative which suggests that ‘*East Asian students’ lack of critical thinking is reflected in their tendency to plagiarise and these inadequacies stifle the educational environment for all students*’. The most popular of the three stereotypes, as I have demonstrated extensively elsewhere,⁵⁶ is that East Asian students lack critical thinking. This generalisation echoes a broader scepticism which exists about the intellectual competence of ethnic minorities in universities whose contributions may be excessively doubted, undermined and dismissed.⁵⁷ The perception of East Asian students as struggling with critical thinking is so entrenched that even those who warn against the pitfalls of ethnocentrism, stereotyping and generalisations may inadvertently perpetuate it.⁵⁸ Furthermore, it may even be given credence by East Asian scholars who may have internalised such negative discourses.⁵⁹ Even accounts which seem to suggest that East Asian students have the potential for critical thinking may unintentionally foster doubts about this, such as when Astarita et al.⁶⁰ claim that the East Asian students that they interviewed were able to demonstrate critical thinking because their research helped their participants to achieve this, which readers may interpret as inferring that the students would not have achieved critical thinking without the authors’ intervention.

Those who believe that East Asian students lack critical thinking skills imply that East Asian students struggle to: a) analyse information objectively, b) appreciate multiple viewpoints and c) arrive at new conclusions. This is concerning given that such attributes can reasonably be understood as universal traits which are found within all cultures in a similar manner to how one may think of problem solving, curiosity, eloquence, innovation, comparison, argumentation, etc, as universal skills. This concern becomes more apparent when one notes

that '[t]he most widely used definition of CT [critical thinking] in this field can be summarised as the skills to make reasoned judgement'.⁶¹ This is noteworthy because it means that doubting East Asian students' critical thinking ability is tantamount to doubting their ability to 'make reasoned judgement', a quality so general that it can be understood as a human attribute rather than one belonging solely to Westerners. Therefore, one may find that all cultures and ethnic groups engage in critical thinking in navigating the local challenges and debates that they encounter. Yet, rather than considering critical thinking as universal, it has often been understood in culturally relativist terms. This is why East Asian students' perceived absence of critical thinking is frequently explained with reference to East Asian culture which is said to be characterised by a hierarchical approach to learning in which knowledge is something that should be extracted, memorised and regurgitated. Furthermore, some claim that East Asian culture promotes conformity rather than individuality which is believed to prevent East Asian students from being able to offer contentious perspectives which defy the status quo. In other words, East Asian students are seen as beholden to a culture that prevents them from questioning or thinking for themselves.

The suggestion that East Asian students struggle with critical thinking is often accompanied by the inference that Western students have a natural affinity with critical thinking. Some commentators have sought to challenge this discourse by drawing upon empirical and anecdotal evidence to show that East Asian students are just as capable of critical thinking as Western students, and in some cases, may even be more advanced in it.⁶² These contributions often claim that Western students are not particularly adept at critical thinking, and that if they are, not to any greater extent than East Asian students. They also highlight that a lack of proficiency in the English language may be misunderstood as reflecting a lack of critical thinking capability. Notwithstanding the attempts to argue that critical thinking is not alien to East Asian students, there are still some who seem to believe that teaching critical thinking to East Asian students may not even be possible.⁶³ However, it is more common for academics to discuss how they can assist East Asian students to achieve critical thinking. These 'saviour academics' may sincerely wish to help East Asian students progress in their education but they also unwittingly stereotype East Asian students.

One of the most influential publications on East Asian students' critical thinking was offered by Atkinson⁶⁴ who appears to straddle the view that East Asian students may not be able to attain critical thinking at the same time as seemingly implying that they can be rescued from their lack of critical thinking ability. More specifically, Atkinson mentions that critical thinking is 'a culturally based concept'⁶⁵ which Westerners are socialised into to the extent that it is possessed as 'tacit, commonsense social practice'.⁶⁶ Atkinson's belief that critical thinking is a Western cultural trait leads him to question the 'transferability' of such a cultural attribute and to state that critical thinking is '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'.⁶⁷ Elsewhere, Atkinson affirms this perspective by suggesting that Westerners are taught critical thinking from childhood, unlike some others, and are therefore 'natural acquirers' of critical thinking.⁶⁸ Yet, despite noting that East Asian students may never achieve critical thinking because it is supposedly absent from their cultural upbringing, he still advocates 'the cognitive apprenticeship model' which positions the Western educator – who he describes as the 'expert' or 'master' – as able to socialise the East Asian student – who he describes as the 'novice' or 'apprentice' – into a Western worldview so as to realise critical thinking.⁶⁹ This dialectic established between the Western 'master' and the East Asian 'apprentice' could be interpreted as suggesting that the former is destined to civilise the latter, albeit with the caveat that enlightenment may not even be possible.

Another stereotype of East Asian students is that they are prone to plagiarism and cheating. What is perhaps most noticeable here is the unsubstantiated generalisations that are made about East Asian students as being more inclined to plagiarise than Western students. For instance, after reading Ehrich et al.,⁷⁰ readers may conclude that Chinese students have a more permissive attitude toward plagiarism than Australian students even though it is also briefly mentioned that Chinese students favour harsher punishments for plagiarism than Australian students, and even though the authors allude to most Australian and Chinese students disapproving of plagiarism. The utility of even asking whether East Asian students are more susceptible to plagiarism is unclear given that it is an individual act which students from any background could commit. This is perhaps why, even though 'prior research has found that men tend to be more predisposed to committing plagiarist acts than women',⁷¹ research which seeks to explore the relationship between plagiarism and gender is almost non-existent.

Sowden⁷² has argued that East Asian students struggle with academic referencing because East Asian culture emphasises collective achievement rather than individual recognition. This overly simplistic generalisation is made without recognising the diversity that exists amongst East Asian students. Furthermore, it is unclear why the supposed collectivist character of East Asian culture would not lead to citation in order to maintain collective harmony and why the supposed individualistic nature of Western culture would not lead to plagiarism due to a prioritisation of the self. Nonetheless, although Sowden warns against stereotyping and accepts that some aspects of East Asian culture may be worth celebrating, he still gives the impression that East Asian students could overcome plagiarism if they integrate themselves into Western culture, a process that he refers to as 'cultural readjustment'.⁷³ Such claims are made without there being sufficient proof that East Asian students are more likely to plagiarise than other students. Insufficient attention is also given to the fact that a significant number of Western students are involved in plagiarism and most East Asian students are not. To recognise this would undermine the presumption that there is a singular Western culture that condemns plagiarism and a singular East Asian culture that condones it. In her refutation of Sowden's article, Phan⁷⁴ offers the example of Vietnam to demonstrate that Vietnamese students are taught about plagiarism from a young age and that referencing is not incompatible with any aspect of Vietnamese culture. Similarly, other studies on East Asian students have found a strong condemnation of plagiarism and an endorsement of citation practices, perhaps even more than can be found amongst Western students.⁷⁵ Thus, the depiction of East Asian students as being more likely to plagiarise than Western students is based on a tenuous stereotype of East Asian students which should be reconsidered.

Elsewhere, there are some commentators who provocatively evoke 'the Yellow Peril' by suggesting that East Asian students pose a threat to the West. This suspicion surfaced recently when the FBI urged American universities to monitor Chinese staff and students after claiming that they may steal sensitive data, technology and knowledge for Beijing.⁷⁶ It is less common for East Asian students to be represented as a national security threat in academic publications but one can find instances when they are depicted as a threat to Western educational environments.⁷⁷ This sentiment appeared in Harryba et al.⁷⁸ when they reported that university staff are often frustrated with international students (often synonymous with East Asian students) due to them being seen as a burden who require excessive assistance and who lower the overall educational standards at the expense of Western students. Harryba et al. do not extensively refute these attitudes, but rather, they introduce the notion of 'international student burnout' to refer to the stress that university staff suffer due to international students. Similarly, Astarita et al.⁷⁹ focus on the claim that Chinese students in Western universities are

Chinese agents who peddle a pro-China narrative on campuses and report back to Beijing about other Chinese students' activities. While Astarita et al.⁸⁰ allude to having some reservations about this conjecture, they do not offer the refutation that such a perspective deserves given the absence of evidence and the potential harms that such a conspiracy theory could have for East Asian students.

In another study, McGowan and Potter⁸¹ focus on how the influx of Chinese students may result in a lowering of educational standards in Western universities, something which they refer to as 'dumbing down'.⁸² McGowan and Potter base their claim on the possibility that East Asian students may not want to obtain a rigorous education and may use their enrolment in Western universities as a backdoor to acquiring longer-term residency in the West. This bold claim may be true in some instances, but there is a lack of evidence to enable us to generalise it as common, and indeed some evidence suggests that East Asian students generally prefer to return back to their home country after completing their studies in the West.⁸³ Correspondingly, Fong⁸⁴ found that while some Chinese students may wish to obtain permanent residency in developed countries, it is most common for Chinese students to desire a social and cultural affiliation with developed countries, rather than legal citizenship, because this will enable them greater opportunities, mobility and career prospects, even though they usually retain a strong desire to return to China after completing their studies. Given the way in which global hierarchies unfairly privilege some nationalities and discriminate against others, it is understandable why East Asian students may want to access such benefits that are routinely afforded to those from the West, especially since Western students also typically possess pragmatic intentions when pursuing higher education (such as enrolling in university for the sake of obtaining a higher-paying career). Given that Western universities are aware of the financial profitability of international students, McGowan and Potter claim that Western universities accommodate East Asian students who have a desire for a timid education which is said to result in the 'dumbing down' of Western higher education. This speculative claim could be interpreted as bordering on another conspiracy theory in which universities and academics are complicit in acceding to the demands of East Asian students. To be clear about their argument, in their own words, McGowan and Potter state: 'The danger is that academic standards may be "dumbed down" as a short-term "fix" to sanction the (unproblematic) commercialization of Australian qualifications in return for overseas fee income'.⁸⁵ Their critique of the way in which internationalisation in higher education is transforming the university is not entirely unfounded, but it is unfortunate that some may understand their approach as blaming East Asian students rather than critiquing the neoliberal internationalisation which East Asian students are also exploited by.⁸⁶

More recently, Foster⁸⁷ has utilised quantitative data to make the case that the presence of international students may have detrimental effects on the educational attainment of Western students. Foster⁸⁸ argues that 'in-class learning may be diminished with the addition of international students to a tutorial classroom' which she explains as follows:

Results show that both international students and NESB [non-English speaking background] students perform significantly worse than other students, even controlling for selection into courses. Both effects are large and persistent. Adding international or domestic NESB students to a tutorial classroom leads to a reduction in most students' marks, and there is a particularly strong negative association between international NESB student concentrations in tutorial classrooms and the marks of students from English-speaking backgrounds.⁸⁹

Foster seemingly conflates Western students who are not from an English-speaking background with international students which serves as an example of how perceptions of East Asian students can be extended to Western students who are ethnic minorities.⁹⁰ This overlooks the major differences that exist between East Asian students who immigrate to the West and East Asian students who are born and raised in the West, and reveals how they are often stereotyped in similar ways.⁹¹ Furthermore, the notion that East Asian students achieve lower marks than native English speakers is a generalisation which is not true in all contexts given that others have observed that ‘international students achieve similar rates of academic success as domestic students in their higher education studies in Australia’.⁹² That aside, one could also note that Western higher education is not necessarily a meritocratic system in which grades reflect one’s innate ability. It is also worth highlighting that East Asian students can bring other benefits to universities such as providing new perspectives or prompting academics to internationalise the curriculum.⁹³ Having said that, this may reduce East Asian students to a resource and mistakenly associate East Asian students’ value with whether they benefit Western students or not. Thus, a better approach may be to deploy just as much concern about East Asian students’ supposed poor performance as about the impact that this is said to have on Western students. Foster⁹⁴ notes that there are instances when the presence of East Asian students may actually lead to an increase in marks. However, she appears to explain this as reflecting standards being lowered to accommodate East Asian students which may imply that the presence of East Asian students is always detrimental, either for lowering other students’ grades or for lowering the educational standards. While it is understandable that academics may wish to explore how students’ attainment differs on the basis of their ethnicity and nationality, caution and ample caveats are required when pursuing this. Otherwise, conclusions may be reached that imply that some students are a burden on others rather than viewing all enrolled students as being equally entitled to membership of the university regardless of their ability. For example, one would rightly hesitate about asking if other sorts of minorities have an adverse effect on the educational environment because *even if* a pattern were found, it would be irrelevant since universities should be equally accommodating to all.

Conclusion

My objective in this article has not been to undermine specific publications nor academics, but rather, to use a decolonial theoretical approach to illustrate the way in which East Asian students may be tacitly stigmatised within Western higher education. This is important to highlight because existing scholarship about the decolonisation of universities has tended to focus on the experiences of ethnic minority staff and those who are racialised as black, and has thus far not adequately critiqued the portrayal of East Asian students in academic literature. It is hoped that this article may help us work toward undoing some of the neglected colonial hierarchies and racial categorisations that remain within higher education by refuting ‘the myth of academic tolerance’, and recognising that academics may also unwittingly stereotype ethnic minorities within universities. Future research may assist us to better appreciate these issues by providing East Asian students with a platform to vocalise their own experiences of studying in Western universities. Meanwhile, there is an urgent need for ‘all academics to recognise the role they may inadvertently play in participating in or allowing racism to occur’.⁹⁵ This includes academics being prepared to admit that our scholarship may be informed by historical and cultural prejudices which unconsciously creep into our work, and being more cognisant of the potential harms that our research can generate, particularly as it holds a scholarly legitimacy which may inform other peoples’ perceptions, as Linda Smith eloquently reminds us:

Research in itself is a powerful intervention, even if carried out at a distance, which has traditionally benefited the researcher, and the knowledge base of the dominant group in

society. When undertaking research, either across cultures or within a minority culture, it is critical that researchers recognize the power dynamic which is embedded in the relationship with their subjects. Researchers are in receipt of privileged information. They may interpret it within an overt theoretical framework, but also in terms of a covert ideological framework. They have the power to distort, to make invisible, to overlook, to exaggerate and to draw conclusions, based not on factual data, but on assumptions, hidden value judgements, and often downright misunderstandings. They have the potential to extend knowledge or to perpetuate ignorance.⁹⁶

Yet, it is insufficient to only focus on individual academics because the marginalisation of ethnic minorities within Western universities is a more endemic problem too. Thus, if we really want to decolonise universities, we must also consider how Western universities can enhance their efforts to confront the various forms of stigmatisation which are experienced by ethnic minority staff and students. Otherwise, the ideal of academic tolerance will remain a myth.

Notes

1. Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 8.
2. 'East Asia' typically includes Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Japan, the Korean peninsula and at least some ASEAN countries. This region is often amalgamated into one bloc on the basis that it is supposedly characterised by a 'Confucian heritage culture'. I reluctantly utilise the term within this article given that it is common for 'East Asians' to be imagined as a monolithic group in Western contexts. At the same time, I recognise that 'East Asia' and 'East Asian' are vague categories which ignore the diversity of East Asian identities (See Takeda, 'Weblog Narratives of Japanese Migrant Women in Australia', 417). Although future research may wish to compare perceptions of East Asian students from specific East Asian countries or ethnicities, in this study, it was found that East Asian students are represented in similar terms regardless of which East Asian country or ethnic group they are from.
3. See Ahn, 'Statistics Prof. Asked Asian students to use "Western Convention" When Writing Their Names'.
4. In Western contexts, 'East Asian' and 'Chinese' are regularly used interchangeably which reflects the tendency to conflate all East Asians as Chinese. In the academic context, this is partly because the majority of East Asian students come from China. The consequence of this is that the stereotypes of Chinese students are routinely extended to all East Asian students, as is apparent in the literature that is analysed in this article, which often focuses on Chinese students but is generalised to all East Asian students.
5. See Zuo, 'Racism Row'.
6. See Geanous, 'Professor Quits After Asking Chinese Students to Speak English on Campus'.
7. In this article, my use of 'the West' and 'Western' broadly refers to North America, Western Europe and Australasia. I recognise that 'the West' and 'Western' are nebulous categories which do not capture the uniqueness of different Western contexts. In this regard, there may be variations in how East Asian students are perceived and treated in different Western countries, and even further, there may even be variations between universities within the same Western country (See EHRC, *Racial Harassment Inquiry*). While future studies may wish to explore the specificities of different Western contexts, this study found a consistency in representations of East Asian students across multiple Western contexts (See Fong, *Paradise Redefined*, 6–10).
8. See Arday et al., 'Attempting to Break the Chain'; Doharty et al., 'The University Went to "Decolonise" And All They Brought Back Was Lousy Diversity Double-Speak!'; Moosavi,

‘Decolonising Criminology’; and Moosavi, ‘The Decolonial Bandwagon and the Dangers of Intellectual Decolonisation’.

9. Kwon et al., ‘Racial Segregation and the Limits of International Undergraduate Student Diversity’.

10. Fong, *Paradise Redefined*.

11. See Brooks, ‘Representations of East Asian Students in the UK Media’; and Collins, ‘Making Asian Students, Making Students Asian’.

12. See Walker-DeVose et al., ‘Southern Assumptions’.

13. See EHRC, *Racial Harassment Inquiry*.

14. See Christian ‘From Liverpool to New York City’; Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, “‘Are you Supposed to Be in Here?’”; and Yao et al. ‘Exploring the Intersection of Transnationalism and Critical Race Theory’.

15. Lander & Santoro, ‘Invisible and Hypervisible Academics’.

16. See Preston, *Whiteness in Academia*.

17. See Walters et al., “‘Before They Kill My Spirit Entirely’”, 626–628.

18. Lander & Santoro, ‘Invisible and Hypervisible Academics’, 1017.

19. See Christian, ‘From Liverpool to New York City’, 424–425.

20. There is a glaring lack of publications about the experiences of non-academic staff in relation to racism in Western universities – the focus tends to be on academic staff members (See Arday, ‘Dismantling Power and Privilege Through Reflexivity’; Doharty et al., ‘The University Went to “Decolonise” And All They Brought Back Was Lousy Diversity Double-Speak!’; and Lander & Santoro, ‘Invisible and Hypervisible Academics’).

21. See Arday et al., ‘Attempting to Break the Chain’; Kwon et al., ‘Racial Segregation and the Limits of International Undergraduate Student Diversity’; and Walker-DeVose et al., ‘Southern Assumptions’.

22. See Christian, ‘From Liverpool to New York City’; and Grant, ‘An Autoethnography’.

23. See Mohamed & Beagan, “‘Strange Faces’ in the Academy’; and Walters et al., “‘Before They Kill My Spirit Entirely’”.

24. Kim, ‘Aspiration for Global Cultural Capital in the Stratified Realm of Global Higher Education’, 122.

25. See Chen & Buell, ‘Of Models and Myths’; and Mayuzumi, ‘Navigating Orientalism’, 286

26. See Weale, ‘Chinese Students Flee UK After “Maskaphobia” Triggered Racist Attacks’; and Wong, ‘Sinophobia’.

27. See Iqbal, “‘They Yelled Coronavirus’”; and Poggio, Parascandola & Annese, “‘When I Go Out, I’m Afraid of People Attacking Me’, Says Victim in Bronx Anti-Chinese Coronavirus Assault’.

28. See Decome, ‘The Rise of the Chinese Villain’; and Mayuzumi, ‘Navigating Orientalism’, 280–281.

29. See Takeda, ‘Weblog Narratives of Japanese Migrant Women in Australia’, 419; and Wong et al., ‘Asian American Male College Students’ Perceptions of People’s Stereotypes About Asian American Men’, 77–84

30. Kawai, ‘Stereotyping Asian Americans’, 110–112.

31. See Decome, ‘The Rise of the Chinese Villain’.

32. Kawai, “‘Stereotyping Asian Americans.

33. See Abelman, *The Intimate University*; Fong, *Paradise Redefined*; and Xu, “‘Diaspora at Home’”.

34. Ryan, “‘The Chinese Learner’”, 37.

35. See Moosavi, “‘Can East Asian Students Think?’”.

36. Preston, *Whiteness in Academia*, 3.

37. Said, *Orientalism*, 245.

38. Song, “‘Chinese Students Syndrome’ in Australia’, 615.
39. Alatas, ‘Intellectual Imperialism’, 25.
40. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.
41. Clark & Gieve, ‘On the Discursive Construction of “The Chinese Learner”’, 57.
42. Edwards et al., ‘Uneven Playing Field or Falling Standards?’, 391.
43. Nield, ‘Questioning the Myth of the Chinese Learner’, 189.
44. See Yang, ‘The PRC “Foreign Talent” Scholars and Their Singaporean “Other”’.
45. See Clark & Gieve, ‘On the Discursive Construction of “The Chinese Learner”’, 59.
46. See Peng, ‘From Migrant Student to Migrant Employee’; Xu, ‘Transborder Habitus in a Within-Country Mobility Context’; and Xu, “‘Diaspora at Home’”.
47. See Ryan, “‘The Chinese Learner’”, 40–41.
48. Xu, ‘Transborder Habitus in a Within-Country Mobility Context’, 1132–1136.
49. See Astarita et al., ‘Chinese Students in Australia’.
50. See Abelmann, *The Intimate University*.
51. Song & McCarthy, ‘Governing Asian International Students’, 359.
52. See above 41., 55.
53. See above 43., 195.
54. See Ryan & Louie, ‘False Dichotomy?’.
55. See Pu & Evans, ‘Critical Thinking in the Context of Chinese Postgraduate Students’ Thesis Writing’.
56. Moosavi, “‘Can East Asian Students Think?’”.
57. See Grant, ‘An Autoethnography’; and Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, “‘Are you Supposed to Be in Here?’”.
58. See Durkin, ‘The Adaptation of East Asian Masters Students to Western Norms of Critical Thinking and Argumentation in the UK’; Egege & Kutieleh, ‘Critical Thinking’; Hammersley-Fletcher & Hanley, ‘The Use of Critical Thinking in Higher Education in Relation to the International Student’; and Zhang, ‘Why Do Chinese Postgraduates Struggle with Critical Thinking?’.
59. See Chiu, ‘Facilitating Asian Students’ Critical Thinking in Online Discussions’; Okada, ‘Conflict between Critical Thinking and Cultural Values’; Zhang, ‘Why Do Chinese Postgraduates Struggle with Critical Thinking?’; and Zhang & Kim, ‘Critical Thinking Cultivation in Chinese College English Classes’.
60. Astarita et al., ‘Chinese Students in Australia’, 331.
61. Pu & Evans, ‘Critical Thinking in the Context of Chinese Postgraduate Students’ Thesis Writing’, 50.
62. See Pu & Evans, ‘Critical Thinking in the Context of Chinese Postgraduate Students’ Thesis Writing’; Rear, ‘International Comparisons of Critical Thinking’; and Song & McCarthy, ‘Governing Asian International Students’.
63. See Hammersley-Fletcher & Hanley, ‘The Use of Critical Thinking in Higher Education in Relation to the International Student’, 981–982.
64. Atkinson, ‘A Critical Approach to Critical Thinking in TESOL’.
65. Atkinson, ‘A Critical Approach to Critical Thinking in TESOL’, 72.
66. Atkinson, ‘A Critical Approach to Critical Thinking in TESOL’, 75.
67. Atkinson, ‘A Critical Approach to Critical Thinking in TESOL’, 89.
68. Atkinson, ‘The Author Responds . . .’, 135.
69. Atkinson, ‘A Critical Approach to Critical Thinking in TESOL’, 87–88.
70. Ehrich et al., ‘A Comparison of Chinese and Australian University Students’ Attitudes Towards Plagiarism’.
71. Ehrich et al., ‘A Comparison of Chinese and Australian University Students’ Attitudes Towards Plagiarism’, 242.

72. Sowden, 'Plagiarism and the Culture of Multilingual Students in Higher Education Abroad'.
73. Sowden, 'Plagiarism and the Culture of Multilingual Students in Higher Education Abroad', 232.
74. Phan, 'Plagiarism and Overseas Students'.
75. See Maxwell et al., 'Plagiarism among Local and Asian Students in Australia'; and Wheeler, 'Culture of Minimal Influence'.
76. See Feng, 'FBI Urges Universities to Monitor Some Chinese Students and Scholars in the U.S.'.
77. See Song, "'Chinese Students Syndrome" in Australia'.
78. Harryba, S. A., 'Challenges Faced by University Staff Members when Providing Services to International Students'.
79. Astarita et al., 'Chinese Students in Australia'.
80. See above 60., 331.
81. McGowan and Potter, 'The Implications of the Chinese Learner for the Internationalization of the Curriculum'.
82. This is not the only time that the notion of 'dumbing down' has been associated with East Asian students in an academic publication (see Edwards et al., 'Uneven Playing Field or Falling Standards?', 392–393).
83. See Astarita et al., 'Chinese Students in Australia', 330–331; and Kim, 'Aspiration for Global Cultural Capital in the Stratified Realm of Global Higher Education'.
84. See above 10.
85. McGowan and Potter, 'The Implications of the Chinese Learner for the Internationalization of the Curriculum', 185.
86. See Yao et al., 'Exploring the Intersection of Transnationalism and Critical Race Theory'.
87. Foster, 'The Impact of International Students on Measured Learning and Standards in Australian Higher Education'.
88. Foster, 'The Impact of International Students on Measured Learning and Standards in Australian Higher Education', 594.
89. Ibid., 588.
90. See Collins, 'Making Asian Students, Making Students Asian', 217–218; and Fong, *Paradise Redefined*, 27.
91. See above 50.
92. Ryan & Louie, 'False Dichotomy?', 407.
93. See Sawir, 'Internationalisation of Higher Education Curriculum'.
94. See above 88., 596.
95. Lander & Santoro, 'Invisible and Hypervisible Academics', 1017–1018.
96. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 176.

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