"Does Chinese philosophy count as philosophy?": decolonial awareness and practices in international English medium instruction programs

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Abstract

This qualitative study integrates key theories on epistemic decolonization from Asia, Africa, and Latin America to investigate the decolonial awareness and curriculum practices of teachers and international students in an English as a medium of instruction (EMI) program on Chinese philosophy and culture at a top-rated university in China. Content analysis of the in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 17 informants reveals that the teachers and students all demonstrated varying degrees of decolonial awareness related to the marginalized status of Chinese philosophy in Anglo–Eurocentric disciplinary systems and adopted the following strategies to decolonialize the curriculum and foster epistemic justice in the unequal geopolitics associated with knowledge production: (1) historicizing Chinese philosophy as a modern discipline that has emerged from inter-knowledge dialogues across philosophical traditions and is still in constant tension with the complex interplay of the semi-colonial, imperial, and Cold War legacies; (2) abandoning the Anglo-Eurocentric benchmark by pluralizing the disciplinary contemporaneity, and (3) cultivating epistemic trust in Chinese through intercultural translation. Moreover, the flexible shuttling between Chinese and English in EMI classrooms and tutorial sessions helped the informants to observe the decolonial awareness that was inherent in their understanding of the discipline-specific ontology. The findings suggest the agentive potential of teachers and international students to foster epistemic justice in EMI curriculum design and implementation that counters the hegemony of English as a colonial force. Finally, implications for decoloniality-informed EMI policymaking and curriculum internationalization are discussed.

Keywords Epistemic decolonization · English medium instruction · Asia as Method · Ecologies of knowledges · Intercultural translation · Internationalization of higher education

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Introduction

With the rate of international student enrollment as a well-recognized index of internationalization, universities in non-Anglophone countries are increasingly striving to develop English as a medium of instruction (EMI) programs to attract international students (Kuroda, 2014; Macaro et al., 2021). A growing body of EMI-related research has focused on problematizing the hegemonic role of English in European and Asian universities (e.g., Dafouz and Smit, 2021; Galloway et al., 2020); these studies have primarily focused on the tension between a monolingual English-only language policy at the institutional level and the translingual practices of teachers and students at the interpersonal level and the difficult-to-achieve balance between teaching and learning English for academic purposes and discipline-specific content knowledge mediated in English (De Costa et al., 2021; Jablonkai and Hou, 2021). Even though the "E" in EMI has been critically examined in multi- and trans-lingual pedagogies, the existing literature largely failed to address the potential risks of epistemic injustice in the internationalization of EMI curriculum (Leask, 2015; Song, 2021).

Nevertheless, several studies on the internationalization of higher education highlighted paradoxes between lingua-cultural diversification policy agendas and the domination of English as the singular academic *lingua franca* and between the vitalization of indigenous knowledge and the domination of English as the global language of knowledge production and dissemination (Gu & Lee, 2019; Kuroda, 2014). Phan (2017) conducted multi-case qualitative research of transnational education in Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines and found the long-lasting impact of colonialism on Asian transnational EMI education, which distinguishes itself from "local" education by importing Western university models and consuming or reproducing knowledge systems produced in Western countries. Due to the semi-colonial history of China and extensively borrowing from the American model of university management, a critique of the desire for the imagined West has been put forth in Chinese internationalization policies, and local students perceive development practices for EMI programs as efforts to internationalize in their own country (Gu and Lee, 2019; Guo et al., 2021; Yang, 2016; Yang et al., 2018). Little EMI-related research has addressed the design and implementation of decoloniality-aware EMI curriculum.

This study draws from key theories on epistemic decolonization to examine decolonial awareness and curriculum decolonization strategies adopted by teachers and international students in an EMI program in a top-rated university in China. Research questions include:

1. How do teachers and students perceive the necessity and current situation of curriculum decolonization in an EMI program?
2. Which strategies did the EMI program teachers and international students adopt or develop to enact decolonial awareness?

Epistemic decolonization in internationalized universities in China

In the context of the internationalization of higher education in China, recruiting international students, promoting local educational models, and considering Chinese as an academic *lingua franca* are significant outward-oriented internationalization strategies that would enhance the status of Chinese universities in the global politics related to knowledge

production (Wu, 2019); these strategies, however, are often constrained by the epistemic injustice imposed by unequal knowledge production geopolitics (Li and Yang, 2020; Xu and Montgomery, 2019).

Drawing on the world-systems theory, studies of the mobility of inbound international students examined China's simultaneous privileged and underprivileged roles in the semi-periphery of the global geopolitics of knowledge production (Mulvey, 2021). Several studies also investigated the presence of Western hegemony and Chinese academics' noncritical responses to this phenomenon in international humanities and social sciences (HSS) publications: Hwang (2016) explored the indigenous theoretical resources such as Confucian rationalism to resist historically sedimented Western hegemony in Chinese social sciences. Yang et al. (2018) criticized the overreliance on Western theoretical constructions in the conceptualization of East Asian higher education in English-mediated academic publications and called for a greater emphasis on indigenous pedagogical and theoretical resources in East Asian higher education research. Xu (2020) investigated the perceptions of Chinese academics on the incentivization of international academic publications in HSS; the findings of this study suggested that internationalization strategies risk the creation of "knowledge from and about China primarily in Western terms without adding a distinctive Chinese strand to the global conversation" (p. 157). Chen (2021) traced the genealogy of the discipline of Chinese sociology and noted deeply entrenched tension between the intellectuals' desire for national revitalization in the imperial and semi-colonial eras and the lack of indigenous epistemic resources to delink the disciplinary development from the colonial-and-modern praxis.

Studies focusing on the epistemic injustice of the global use of EMI in the Chinese context yielded contradictory findings. Gu and Lee (2019) found that even though EMI curricula were often modeled after curricula in Anglophone countries and content planning was homogeneous, this practice created "a heterogeneous context of cultures and values and [yielded a] critical understanding of internationalization, globalization, and diversity among students" (p. 389). According to Guo et al. (2021), Chinese students in top-rated university EMI programs equated internationalization with Westernization, and the unexamined mass adoption of English as medium of instruction is problematic and may reinforce unequal geopolitics related to knowledge production. These EMI studies urged critical internationalization approaches that question the world-class university criteria modeled on Anglo-European universities and explore a de-Westernized alternative social imaginary of internationalization. Epistemic injustice related to the targeting of international students in Chinese EMI university programs has not been sufficiently explored; and according to Dafouz and Smit (2021), even though most studies focused on English language policies and planning, English-mediated knowledge construction in international classrooms has been largely ignored. This study will address this gap by exploring the efforts of teachers and international students to decolonialize the construction of disciplinary knowledge in an international EMI program.

Theoretical framework

Decolonial studies on the politics of knowledge production and epistemic injustice have provided valuable theoretical perspectives and analytical resources to understand decolonialization practices in the context of higher education internationalization. To construct a theoretical framework that will facilitate our analysis of decolonial awareness and

associated practices in an EMI program, this section will first outline major deconstruction and reconstruction efforts in the literature on epistemic decolonization in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Centering on epistemic pluriversality, the aim of which is to transcend the hierarchical binary opposition between the West and the rest of the world, this section will consider additional details from Chen's (2010) *Asia as Method* and Santo's *Epistemologies from the South* as complementary frameworks to guide the following analysis.

Decolonial theorists have historically pointed out contemporary global geopolitics of knowledge production that emerged and were reproduced in the praxes of modernity and coloniality (e.g., Chakrabarty, 2000; Connell, 2007; Mignolo, 2005; Spivak, 1999). Anglo-Eurocentrism and linear developmentalism are two entrenched discourses that have continued to reinforce the coloniality-and-modernity praxes underlying global knowledge production. This has co-created the "transcendental delusion" wherein Eurocentric knowledge is separated from specific geo-historical contexts and regarded as universally relevant and applicable (Alcoff, 2017; Dussel, 2014). Anglo-Eurocentrism is intertwined with English-language hegemony, and advantages garnered by Anglo-European universities were further consolidated during the Cold War era, when English became the dominant academic *lingua franca* and Anglo-European educational models were considered "standard" in other countries and regions (Altbach and Wit, 2015). In this context, terms such as "Global North" and "Global South" are used "to loosely distinguish the northern and southern Hemispheres, affluent and marginal nations and communities obviously do not line up neatly within this geographical frame" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 505). Linear developmentalism penetrated the internationalization of higher education, where leading universities in the Global North are positioned at the top of university ranking lists due to criteria that encouraged competition fetish in higher education and led to the socio-psychological desire for international belonging demonstrated by universities in the Global South (Shahjahan & Morgan, 2016; Stein et al., 2019).

Decolonial scholars from the Global South have deconstructed Eurocentrism and linear developmentalism in higher education. Malaysian sociologist Seyd Hussein Atlas, for example, criticized Global South scholars who were trained in the Global North for having a "captive mind," which is an "uncritical and imitative mind dominated by an external source, whose thinking is deflected from an independent perspective" (Alatas, 1974, p. 692). Hountondji (2009) also critiqued African scholars' studies on Africa for being externally oriented and advocated "the development in Africa of an autonomous, self-reliant tradition of research and knowledge that addresses problems and issues directly or indirectly posed by Africans" (p. 121).

In addition to deconstructing coloniality as the dark side of modernity, other reconstruction efforts have also been made. In their analyses of the decolonization of African universities, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) and Mbembe (2016) both emphasized the importance of epistemic pluriversity and argued that provincializing Anglo-European knowledge, the self-assured relevance of indigenous African knowledge, and inter-knowledge dialogues that transcend disciplinary divisions are necessary steps to foster worldwide epistemic justice. To de-center English as the exclusive academic *lingua franca*, Thiong'o ([1986]1994) advocated abandoning English and legitimizing indigenous languages as a significant medium of knowledge.

In line with these efforts to foster epistemic pluriversity, Chen's *Asia as Method* (2010) proposed a critical, postmodernist approach to decolonize and de-imperialize Asian knowledge-production processes. The critical aspect of this approach is grounded in geo-colonial historical materialism (GHM), a modified version of Marxist historical materialism. GHM presupposes that world history is composed of several constantly

changing regionally based local histories that merge into complex relationships with other local histories (p. 250). According to Chen, GHM requires that decolonial scholars and practitioners politicize the epistemological grounding of historical materialism, de-center Eurocentrism that portrays the world as an abstract, homogeneous space, and "emphasize the relative autonomy of local history and to insist on grasping analytically the specificities of the historical and the geographical" (p. 108).

On the basis of GHM, Chen proposed two strategies for epistemic diversification: relativization and critical syncretism. Relativization refers to the mutual objectification of the self and the other between epistemic frames of reference at diverse geopolitical locations to achieve an egalitarian, pluralistic approach to knowledge production. Critical syncretism explicitly encourages the adoption of geopolitically weak epistemic frames of reference; these frames of reference are not randomly selected or based on individual preferences and should be generated as a system of multiple reference points emerging from historically grounded interactions and inter-articulation sites.

While Chen was moving toward transcending the dichotomy between the West and the rest of the world, in *Epistemology of the South* (2014), Santos detailed how Chen's relativization and cultural syncretism could be realized in epistemic decolonization processes by creating knowledge ecologies and conducting intercultural translations. The goal of both strategies is the rejection of abyssal thinking that "rendered [knowledge and discourses] incommensurable and incomprehensible for meeting neither the scientific methods of truth nor their acknowledged contesters in the realm of philosophy and theology" (p. 120). In comparison to *Asia as Method*, Santo challenged the dichotomy between the West and the rest of the world and insisted on the "radical co-presence" of a plurality of knowledges that follow multiple temporalities and manifest a plurality of contemporaneity (Santos, 2014, p. 191). It is assumed that each type of knowledge has internal and external limitations that confine the scope and perspective of epistemic exploration and create an inherent need for dialogue among the traditions of knowledge. While the knowledge in dialogic relations is not without hierarchies, they are dynamic and situated and thus need to be learned and applied in relation to their respective histories of emergence and dissemination.

This notion of inter-knowledge dialogue resonates with Lugones's (2006) notion of complex communication, which "requires praxical awareness of one's own multiplicity and a recognition of the other's opacity that does not attempt to assimilate it into one's own familiar meaning" (p. 75). Recent studies have also drawn attention to scholarly referencing as a form of decolonial inter-knowledge articulation, wherein purposeful inclusion of academic references from the Global South and selective exclusion of some references from the Global North serve as counter-strategies against the colonial praxis of disciplinary belonging and inclusion (Lewis, 2018).

Intercultural translation can be understood as "a living process of complex interactions among heterogeneous artifacts, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, combined with exchanges that by far exceed logocentric or discourse-centric frameworks" (Santos, 2014, p. 219). According to Santos, this phenomenon occurs in decolonial contact zones where "each partner, as both knowledge and practice bearer, [can] decide what is put in contact with whom [and as] the work of translation advances and intercultural competence deepens, it becomes possible to bring into the contact zone dimensions of knowing and acting considered more relevant" (p. 217). The presumed translatability across a plurality of knowledges mediated by different languages provides the very foundation for radical copresence at both sides of the abyssal line. In a later work, Santos (2020) suggested that ecologies of knowledges and intercultural translation are both effective means to decolonize university

curricula by including previously absent and silenced knowledge from the Global South while building mutual intelligibility knowledges across time and space.

Research methodology

Research context

The present study was conducted in a top-rated university in China. Among the first few universities to receive international students since 1949, this university was also one the pioneering educational institutions to develop 2-year international EMI master's degree programs in 2008. This case study was carried out in an EMI Chinese Philosophy and Culture master's degree program. In the field of philosophy, Chinese philosophy and other branches of non-Anglo-European philosophy (e.g., Indian philosophy and Japanese philosophy) are often categorized as "Asian Studies." Many departments of philosophy in the USA only have faculty vacancies for one professor specializing in Chinese philosophy or none (Norton, 2017). Aimed at changing the marginalized position of Chinese philosophy in the global geopolitics of knowledge production, the EMI program under study was initially launched in 2011 as the first fully fledged international EMI program and encompassed multiple sub-branches of Chinese philosophy, including but not limited to Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Legalism. According to interviews with the program coordinator and the program secretary, the department admits an average of 10 international students each year; from 2011 to 2020, the program admitted a total of 87 full-time international students and 18 international exchange students from 25 countries. The admission rate remained stable throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, even though half or more of the admitted students chose the online mode of learning. In addition to offering EMI discipline-specific courses, the program also requires that students enroll in four-credit-hour Chinese-language courses of various levels and participate in a weekly tutorial of classic Chinese language; in this tutorial, international students are divided into groups of two according to their self-estimated level of Chinese competence, and each group is tutored by a graduate student in the Chinese-medium-instruction master's degree program.

This program was chosen due to its uniqueness and representativeness (Yin, 2016). Its uniqueness lies in its explicit decolonialization agenda to enhance the status of Chinese philosophy in international academia, specifically that of the Global North, which is mentioned by the founder of the EMI program under study in the research interview and in the program report for application of the national award for international EMI programs as shared by the program secretary. The program has indeed received the national award of outstanding international EMI programs in 2018. Given the unequal socio-economic statuses and distribution of educational resources in China, this program is representative of international EMI programs in the top-rated universities in non-Anglophone countries that have the teaching capacity and explicit agenda to strengthen the university's status as internationally competitive centers of knowledge production (Marginson, 2017).

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data to understand degree to which teachers and international students were aware of decolonialization and relevant practices in

Table 1 List of international student informants

Student pseudonym	Gender	Year of study	Country of origin
George	Male	2	Switzerland
Serenata	Female	2	Portugal
Louisiana	Female	1	Thailand
Pedro	Male	2	Spain
Lucas	Male	2	Spain
Hugo	Male	2	Brazil
Antonio	Male	2	Puerto Rico
John	Male	1	Britain
Danny	Male	1	Canada
Philip	Male	Graduated	Germany

Table 2 List of teacher informants

No	Gender	Age range	Country of origin
T1	Male	50–60	China
T2	Male	30–40	China
T3	Male	60–70	China
T4	Female	40–50	China
T5	Male	60–70	France
T6	Female	30–40	China

the EMI program. The present study followed maximal diversity sampling approach and invited a total of 10 international students, six teachers, and one administrative staff member in the EMI program to be interviewed between March and November of 2021 (see Tables 1 and 2). The teacher informants were in different age ranges, taught diverse disciplinary specializations, and had disparate educational and research experiences and levels of administrative engagement in the program; and the students' countries of origin varied, as did their previous learning and working experiences. Each semi-structured interview lasted for 1–2 h, and pseudonyms were assigned to all informants to protect their privacy.

The teacher interviews were all conducted in Chinese, and the questions focused on the instructors' course design and pedagogical strategies associated with content knowledge and classic Chinese language practices as inherent components of the content knowledge of Chinese philosophy; their views on the EMI program as it related to their teaching and research experiences and perceptions of the role of Chinese philosophy in the production of local knowledge; and their language choices and strategies in mono-, bi-, or multilingual academic publications and other reading materials. The student interviews were all conducted in English, and the informants were asked about their previous living and educational experiences, Chinese language proficiency and learning experiences, motivation for joining the EMI program and current learning experiences in and out of the (virtual) classroom, and their views on Chinese philosophy and its status quo standing in the field of philosophy at the global level.

The informants consented to have their interviews audio recorded, transcribed, and double-checked by both this author and a research assistant. A thematic analysis, the coding process of which is recursive and iterative, was then conducted to scrutinize the interview transcripts, and inductive coding was implemented to identify emerging themes in the data,

such as "Chinese philosophy is philosophy in its own right," "Systematicity and rationality are hegemonic criteria adopted from Western philosophy at certain historical stages," and "Chinese philosophy helps to address fundamental questions of human societies in general"; these themes were then abstracted into broader thematic domains informed by the theoretical framework and relevant literature in relation to the research questions (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The thematic domains that form the structure of this following analysis are the historicization of Chinese philosophy as a contested, inter-articulated modern discipline, the abandonment of the Western benchmark by pluralizing the disciplinary contemporaneity, and the cultivation of epistemic trust in the Chinese language through intercultural translation.

Findings

Historicizing Chinese philosophy as a contested, inter-articulated modern discipline

The teachers' responses extensively described their decision-making process in curriculum design as it related to the complex interplay between colonial, imperial, and Cold War era legacies in the history of their discipline. For instance, T4 revealed a tendency to open the floor for critical discussions on the historical processes that contributed to the underprivileged position of Chinese philosophy as a non-Western branch of philosophy:

> **T4:** It emerged as a modern discipline in the 1920s when the Chinese intellectuals were eager to use their knowledge about Western philosophy to re-build Chinese philosophy as a modern discipline where all those ancient thinkers were being regarded as historical burdens that hindered the modernization of China and led to its underprivileged position in wars with the Western imperial countries.

Her comment captures the historic tension between the strong desire for nationalist revitalization and the lack of indigenous hermeneutic resources to construct an alternative disciplinary system of philosophy distinct from the Eurocentric models (Chen, 2021).

Some international student informants believed it was fruitless and unnecessary to respond to the recurrent question of whether Chinese philosophy qualified as philosophy. Pedro, for example, felt that in discussions on this topic, he and his classmates from Anglo-European countries were implicitly positioned as representatives of Western academia, which resonated with Alatas' (1974) critique of "the captive mind." In his interview, Pedro asserted that without being burdened by the semi-colonial and imperial history, "it's time for China to abandon the Western criteria of systematicity and rationality and to make new proposals." Other international students such as John, who are more familiar with the Chinese history of ideas, demonstrated greater understanding and sympathy regarding the instructor-led discussions by highlighting the challenges imposed by unequal knowledge-production geopolitics that are mired in the semi-colonial and imperial histories.

An alternative method to encourage international students to better understand the heterogeneous historical formation of Chinese philosophy proposed by T3, T4, and T6 is to highlight the inter-knowledge articulations between Europe and China that co-shaped what can be termed as Chinese philosophy today, instead of constructing Western versus Chinese philosophies as a binary opposition (Chen, 2010; Santos, 2014). T3, for example, described his disciplinary specialization and teaching strategies as follows:

T3: The debates on dialectic materialism and historical materialism in the 1930s shaped the Marxist tradition of Chinese philosophy, whereas the Neo-Confucianism tradition of Chinese philosophy today derived from the debates between Confucian and Kantian philosophies. My line of research is another one. It can be traced back to the Chinese Classics in the Qing dynasty. Thanks go to Professor Zhou Yutong, who continued and refined the history-oriented approach to Chinese Classics in the 1960s. On their shoulders, my academic efforts were primarily about situating the development of Chinese Classics in intercultural exchanges between Chinese philosophers and the Christian missionaries in the 17th century.

The disciplinary tradition diversity summarized by T3 has been adopted and appropriated by different teachers in the EMI program and was appreciated by all the informants, as it allows students to have diverse exposures and reflections on the disciplinary possibilities of Chinese philosophy. The shared emphasis on inter-knowledge articulations by teachers across geopolitical time and space also enables international students to mobilize their epistemic and linguistic resources related to Anglo-European philosophies and languages to facilitate their learning and understanding of Chinese philosophy. In this sense, the EMI program creates a decolonial contact zone that allows "complex communication" for the sharing of epistemic resources and decolonial strategies based on the participants' embodied experiences (Lugones, 2006, p. 75).

The teacher informants also addressed the inclusion of teaching materials of notable sinologists to incorporate an explicit decolonialization strategy into the curriculum. T1, T2, T3, and T4 concurred that the growing international prominence of sinology advanced the development and enhanced the presence of Chinese philosophy in English-mediated publications because of colonial and Cold War era legacies, which relegated Chinese studies to a single area of study requiring sinologists specializing in Chinese philosophy. Several of the teachers similarly described striking a balance between English-language publications they deemed produced high-quality content and consensus sinologist publications preferred by their Chinese colleagues, which echoes the decolonial awareness about citationality stressed by Lewis (2018).

Abandoning the Western benchmark by pluralizing disciplinary contemporaneity

As Santos (2014) pointed out, temporal fossilization risks turning a discipline into a historical inquiry of pre-modern times, which the linear model of development will then describe as lagging behind more-modern disciplines. In the interviews, the international student informants recognized the marginalization of Chinese philosophy within the philosophy departments of Anglo-European universities and agreed that the Western benchmark of linear developmentalism should be abandoned in relation to Chinese philosophy. Danny preferred to categorize philosophical traditions based on non-linear criteria, such as defining characteristics and/or rhetorical styles, and used metaphors in *Zhuangzi* as an example; Antonio shared his "weird" experience of learning Mexico philosophy as a mixture of French existentialism and German phenomenology as an indication of the inappropriateness of universalizing a Eurocentric classification of philosophy in non-European contexts; and Serenata moved beyond Antonio's postcolonial reflection and opined that the vitality of the discipline of Chinese philosophy should not be described by fossilizing ancient Chinese philosophy but by developing new philosophical terminology in the Chinese language that addresses contemporary human concerns.

Serenata: Professors here are developing Chinese philosophy as contemporaneous. **[T1] is an example. He is writing on the development of Confucianism nowadays as a political philosophy […] It's not like Confucianism died, and God knows how much Neo-Confucianism has got revived in the past few decades, right? I think we should focus more on that than on a dozen racist people who place themselves in very high positions within Western philosophy departments.

Some teachers agreed with the students' demand for greater inclusion of contemporary Chinese philosophy and adopted diverse strategies to pluralize the disciplinary contemporaneity and realize the essential copresence of Chinese philosophy alongside other nation-based philosophes and create decolonialized ecologies of philosophical knowledges (Santos, 2014). In his interview, T1 asserted the necessity of a political philosophy that is informed by Confucianism and Legalism with distinct conceptual decolonization to address inherent flaws in the American democracy model; by developing a distinct set of moral philosophical concepts based on ancient Chinese philosophy, T1 aims to not only provincialize the Anglo-European political philosophy, but to also introduce the contemporary global relevance of ancient Chinese ways of thinking into heated debates within the international philosophy community, rather than only in debates related to Asian studies (Chakrabarty, 2000).

T6 adopted a decolonialization strategy of finding shared concerns across nation-bound philosophical classifications and proposing new philosophical concepts and classification categories; specifically, her research was centered on identifying genealogical comparisons between French and Chinese philosophical concepts. In her interview, T6 also emphasized the necessity of focusing on contemporary Chinese philosophy while acknowledging the appropriation of Western thinking by Chinese philosophers that challenges the binary opposition between the West and the rest of the world and emphasizes the use of local language as not only a legitimate medium of transferring knowledge, but also as a knowledge-transforming force that seeks to construct the internal plurality of Chinese philosophy in philosophical knowledge ecologies around the world (Thiong'o [1986]1994; Santos, 2014):

> **T6:** Focusing exclusively on ancient Chinese thinkers can easily create an impression that contemporary China has no state-of-the-art thoughts, and that China is an ancient, exotic country fixated on the past. I would say that Western philosophies—such as Marxism, Kant, and Heidegger—had an enormous impact on contemporary Chinese thinkers such as Li Zehou. When these Western thoughts were translated into [the Chinese language], they become an inherent part of Chinese thinking. Language has this power. The international students are very interested in Chinese appropriation of Western philosophy.

In contrast, T5 attempted to "modernize" teaching practices within the EMI program at the micro-level by highlighting the appropriateness of the use of textual analysis as a universal approach to learn text-based sub-disciplines of philosophy.

> **T5:** I think I take modernization very seriously […] When we read a classic text, we gradually develop a sense of belonging. Modernization means that we make interpretations of these classic texts. But you must listen to those texts before coming up with an interpretation of your own. If you read Mencius naturally, without labeling it as either traditional or modern, you can turn it into part of the modern understanding and analysis […] In principle, it's an approach that can be applied to any text-based philosophy in the world.

T1, T2, and T6 also foregrounded the textual-analysis-based approach in response to questions related to classroom pedagogy. Echoing Chen's (2010) geosocial historical materialism, T1 described textual analysis as an effective method to reverse the historical trend of teaching Chinese philosophy as a history of ancient philosophical thoughts through the lens of Marxist theories during the Cold War era. Distinguishing Chinese philosophy from a history of Chinese philosophy and foregrounding the former within the EMI curriculum lends interpretive agencies to both the teachers and the international students, whose primary objective is to "understand" *what* and *how* philosophical thoughts were conveyed in the Chinese philosophical texts, rather than "knowing" philosophical thoughts as artifacts and historical legacies of ancient China. In this sense, the contemporaneity of Chinese philosophy serves as a prerequisite for the identification of commonalities and complementary possibilities between philosophers within and across nation-bound philosophical traditions (Santos, 2014, p. 177).

Cultivating epistemic trust in the Chinese language through intercultural translation

In addition to the construction of knowledge ecologies to identify the essential co-presence of Chinese philosophy in the EMI program, the teacher informants also adopted decolonialization strategies similar to Santos's (2014) intercultural translation to compare concepts and worldviews espoused in Chinese philosophy with those in other branches of philosophy. Five of the six teachers included the original Chinese texts with one or more English translated versions thereof in their PowerPoint slides; in this way, English is used as a bridge language to provide mediational access to the original Chinese philosophical texts. T2, for example, described his use of sinologist D. C. Lau's translation of *The Mencius*:

> **T2:** I [started] with a philosophical text […] *The Mencius* [then] I chose D. C. Lau's English– Chinese bilingual version […] One advantage of using the bilingual version is to identify some inaccuracies of his translation in terms of translingual discrepancies in conceptual meanings, yet without [explaining the importance of] Confucianism in the Song and Ming dynasties, his translation fell short in conceptual accuracy for rigid philosophical reasoning. I used it as a prompt to initiate in-class discussions on key concepts in Confucianism.

T2 went on to explain that by comparing and contrasting key notions of Confucian philosophy—such as the concept of 心 (or "heart-mind")—with relevant concepts in European philosophies, such as "consciousness," "heart," and "mind," the challenge of settling on an English translation to accurately capture the essence of the original Chinese concept became salient for the international students. In this way, the students came to understand that even though the English language can be epistemically facilitating, it is untrustworthy to some extent, and epistemic truth resides in the original Chinese-language philosophical texts; this, in turn, motivated the international students to improve their comprehensive competence in the traditional Chinese language.

Intercultural translation not only applies to trans-lingual concepts, but also to shared philosophical concerns across time and space, as T1 explained:

> If you want to teach the Confucian concept of filial piety, you could start with the argument that any moral philosophy needs to have something that transcends the individual. Christianity put individuals on equal footing in front of God whilst Con-

fucianism prioritizes family interests over individual interests. Whether it's God or family, the motivation behind is the same.

T1's pedagogical strategy of starting from a shared motivation for philosophical inquiries of different philosophical traditions resonated with a sub-strategy of intercultural translation described by Santos (2014), "diatopical hermeneutics," which "consists of interpretation work between two or more cultures to identify isomorphic concerns among them and the different responses thereby provided" (p. 219).

Moreover, the international students' embodied experiences while learning philosophy prior to participating in the EMI program also enabled them to attribute epistemic trust in the Chinese language when they were learning Chinese philosophy. Having grown up and completed her bachelor's degree in Thailand, Louisiana adopted Thai Buddhism as her epistemic frame of reference; this assured her that Sanskrit is an inherent component of Buddhist philosophy, just as the Chinese language is an inherent part of Chinese philosophy. This relativization between Chinese philosophy and Thai Buddhism also enacted a geo-politically weak frame-of-reference that aligned with Chen's decolonializing strategy of cultural syncretism.

> **Louisiana:** In Thailand, there is a [Buddhist] temple that keeps scripts known as the Pāli Canon. The monk in online Buddhism workshops said we need to understand what the Buddha said in dialogues with his disciples and read the commentaries later. That's where I got the idea that reading the original philosophical text is so important.

The international students' diverse educational and national backgrounds also provided a ready-made foundation for the presence of multiple frames of reference in classroom discussions, which are the prerequisite for the construction of a translatable contact zone. John obtained a bachelor's degree in Analytical Philosophy and a master's degree in Medical Philosophy in the UK; when discussing his exposure to philosophical traditions before and after joining the EMI program, he stated:

> **John:** In the UK, philosophy is just Anglo-analytical philosophy. We do not read much continental philosophy. I learned those by reading on my own. […] Teachers here are also very familiar with different philosophical traditions. The open-mindedness was not found in my previous universities [in the UK].

Both John and T6, who earned a master's degree in philosophy in the USA, concluded that the lack of decolonial awareness in efforts to provincialize Analytical Philosophy as one of many branches of philosophy led to its domination in philosophy departments throughout Anglophone countries, which ensured rare space to conduct discipline-specific intercultural translation.

Discussion

This study drew on key theories on epistemic decolonization to analyze how decolonial awareness and decolonialization practices were understood and adopted by teachers and international students in an EMI master's degree program on Chinese philosophy and culture at a top-rated, comprehensive university in China. Extant studies have extensively argued that the implementation of EMI often equates Anglicization with internationalization and thereby risks endangering the status of local languages as legitimate mediators

of knowledge (Galloway et al., 2020; Gu and Lee, 2019; Jablonkai and Hou, 2021; Phan, 2017). In dialogue with these studies, this article provides a counter-case that includes an explicit agenda and strategies to foster disciplinary epistemic justice that can be put into practice in curriculum and in pedagogical design. Even though the informants were unaware of *Asia as Method* and *Epistemologies of the South*, their decolonial awareness and decolonialization practices were in line with Chen's and Santos's ideas. The findings of this study indicate that in rare instances, such as the program included in this study, an EMI program neither imposes English-language hegemony nor epistemic oppression of Anglo-European-centric knowledge production, but rather enables teachers and international students to construct a decolonialized space of disciplinary knowledge construction (Dafouz and Smit, 2021; De Costa et al., 2021). When viewed as a strategy to internationalize higher education, EMI programs of the kind can be used as a decolonial-informed bridge between inward- and outward-oriented strategies for knowledge innovation and dissemination (Wu, 2019).

The co-inclusion of English and Chinese language versions of Chinese classics did not position English and Chinese as competing mediators of disciplinary knowledge, nor were there inadequate levels of English proficiency among the teachers or the students (Gu and Lee, 2019; Kuroda, 2014; Phan, 2017). The translatability of the Chinese texts allows for the construction of a translatable contact zone for teachers and students with different levels of exposure to multilingual philosophical traditions across time and space to co-negotiate and explore mutual intelligibility facilitated by a sub-strategy of diatopical hermeneutics (Santos, 2014). At the same time, a disciplinary emphasis on textual analysis allows teachers to help students attribute epistemic trust to the original Chinese-language texts, which are indispensable when attempting to access the unintelligible portions of Chinese philosophy that is inherent in the Chinese language, which echoes with Thiong'o ([1986]1994).

The semi-peripheral position of Chinese universities in international student mobility has frequently been examined through a postcolonial lens (Mulvey, 2021); these studies often concluded with a series of neo-colonial replications in which China is subject to the epistemic hegemony of Anglo-European centers of knowledge production, which reproduced similar hegemony over international students coming from periphery countries like those on the African continent. The findings of the present study differ from the oppression-submission replication cycle identified in these studies because the teacher and student informants adopted different decolonialization strategies to ensure the "radical copresence" of Chinese philosophy alongside other branches of world philosophy and highlight the contemporary relevance and vitality thereof in various ways. The contemporaneity of Chinese philosophy is essential to de-center Anglo-Eurocentrism in the legitimacy of philosophical knowledge (Alcoff, 2017; Chakrabarty, 2000; Dussel, 2014). Meanwhile, the co-inclusion of academic references from both local Chinese scholars and overseas sinologists also helps enhance the epistemic pluriversity in the EMI curriculum and thus draws attention to the linguistic-epistemic awareness of the EMI instructors as both academic writers and teachers in the context of internationalization of higher education (Li and Yang, 2020; Xu, 2020; Xu and Montgomery, 2019; Yang et al., 2018).

Given their distinct knowledge repertoires and life trajectories, the decolonialization strategies adopted by the teachers and students were mutually inclusive. The teachers extensively implemented a historicization strategy to locate themselves within the contested disciplinary history of Chinese philosophy and to critically select courses materials and design learning activities. In line with Chen's (2010) geosocial historical materialism approach, the teachers offered retrospective accounts of the heterogeneous disciplinary traditions of Chinese philosophy throughout the semi-colonial, imperial, and Cold War

periods. These decolonial-aware retrospective accounts acknowledged and balanced histor-ical and the geographical specificities while placing intertwined historical and geopolitical forces at the center of their analyses. More importantly, they incorporated several decolo-nialization strategies into their teaching and learning practices that echo Santos's (2014) knowledge ecologies and intercultural translation as they sought to construct a decolonial contact zone within the EMI program.

While the international students were largely unfamiliar with the disciplinary history of Chinese philosophy, they adopted delinearization as their decolonialization strategy to de-center the Anglo-Eurocentrism that has historically contributed to the marginalization of Chinese philosophy in international philosophy academia; this finding is in line with Chen's GHM approach and the call for decolonialized curriculum design in critical inter-nationalization studies (Shahjahan and Morgan, 2016; Stein et al., 2019). These students mobilized their knowledge derived from either their embodied experiences in the postco-lonial societies of their home countries or critical reflections on their disciplinary learning experiences. They also actively engaged in inter-knowledge articulations during classroom discussions and thereby played essential roles in the co-construction of a decolonialized, translatable contact zone (Santos, 2014).

Research on de-Westernizing Asian higher education has criticized the simple equa-tion between internationalization and Westernization, which serves as a ready-made social imaginary for key stakeholders in EMI programs and other aspects of the internationaliza-tion of higher education (Guo et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the diversifica-tion of epistemic frames of reference adopted by the teacher informants problematized the West-China dichotomy by highlighting the heterogeneity within the Western and Chinese categories while attending to the geopolitically weak frames of reference in regional flows of philosophical thoughts.

Conclusion

With a stated initiative to transform the marginalized position of Chinese philosophy in the Euro-America-centric international philosophy academia mediated by English, the aims of this investigation were to increase awareness of decolonialization and potential epistemic injustice in EMI curriculum design and development and to identify decolonialization strategies that can provide insights into implementation of critical curriculum internation-alization in non-Anglophone universities.

These findings imply that by focusing on the knowledge construction and negotiation processes situated within the unequal global geopolitics related to knowledge production, theoretical resources for epistemic decolonization from Asia, Africa, and Latin America can be employed as an integrated lens to analyze decolonial awareness and related practices in EMI programs (Mbembe, 2016; Mignolo, 2005; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). As teachers have adopted explicit decolonial stances when designing and enacting an EMI program, their decolonializing practices aligned with Chen's geosocial historical materialism to a significant degree; these inter-referencing sub-strategies can be further unpacked within the contexts of knowledge ecologies and intercultural translation proposed by Santos (2014). The present study also provides useful practical implications for the design of decolonial-, language-aware EMI curriculum, which is important because language support is an ele-ment that is often missing or under-emphasized. The student-led tutorials and bilingual teaching materials chosen by the teachers effectively cultivated the international students'

knowledge of the Chinese language as a "natural" part of disciplinary knowledge, rather than being socialized into the "captive mind" that results from the adoption of Anglo-Eurocentric epistemic resources and criteria to interpret and assess Chinese philosophy (Alatas, 1974). By developing a decolonial awareness and adopting decolonialization strategies, teachers and students in international EMI programs can construct decolonial contact zones that simultaneously allow inter-knowledge articulations and attribute epistemic trust to indigenous or local languages as a medium of knowledge; in this way, EMI programs can become platforms for epistemic decolonization and effectively challenge the hegemony of the English language as a colonial and imperial force. Future EMI research should focus on the teaching and learning of content knowledge, specifically the knowledge construction processes in and out of the classroom.

In terms of decolonial-aware curriculum and pedagogical design, it should be clarified that even though the three major strategies identified in this study are neither exhaustive nor prescriptive, they can be included as a component of a decolonialization strategy and used in future studies guided by explicit decoloniality oriented research design, especially in top-rated universities with faculty members who have a high English communicative capacity for academic purposes; this suggestion is not intended to reinforce educational inequality but rather to emphasize the responsibility to foster epistemic justice at the global scale that fall directly on the shoulders of these faculty members. At the same time, considering the scarcity of EMI studies from the decolonial perspective, there have been an increasing number of critical studies on indigenous education; future research could also focus on bridging these two groups of scholars to facilitate collaboration and generate a specific agenda to decolonize EMI programs worldwide that is informed by theoretical resources related to language policy and curriculum and pedagogical design in indigenous studies.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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