



Cultural nationalism and its effect on Chinese higher education: continuity and variation

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Abstract

Since 1840, Chinese political leaders have struggled to draw effectively from Western culture without abandoning the Chinese essence in their design of higher education. In this paper, we use cultural nationalism as the theoretical framework to examine how Chinese political leaders have responded to this challenge. Our analysis shows that cultural nationalism closely links to politics, and although the form taken by cultural nationalism has varied throughout Chinese history, it has significantly influenced Chinese higher education. In particular, we identify a strong cultural nationalism in today's China, which has already influenced teaching and research in Chinese higher education. Finally, we discuss the implications and limitations of this paper, and call for critical reflections of cultural nationalism and its impact on Chinese higher education.

Keywords Cultural nationalism · China · Higher education · Chinese culture · Western culture

Introduction

Cultural nationalism is generally understood as a cultural pride that is based on three ideas: (1) that one culture is shared by all its members, (2) members should adhere to their distinctive and historically rooted way of life and sustain it for generations, and (3) certain actions are needed when the national culture is in danger (Smith, 2010). It is manifested in many parts of the world and is intertwined with politics, national identity, and culture wars, including the hostility in France toward immigrants and multiculturalism, the identity politics in Quebec, and Brexit. Cultural nationalism connects with a nation's particular path toward modernization (Lin, 2023; Smith, 2010). In China, cultural nationalism closely links to the aspiration to modernize traditional culture to catch up and exceed the West (Guo, 2004). Extensive research has examined Chinese nationalism from ethnic and political perspectives before President

Xi Jinping came to power in 2012 (Gries, 2004; Harrison, 2001; Hughes, 2006; Leibold, 2007; Zhao, 2004). However, little research has explored the nationalistic moves in today's China by focusing on how “culture” is politicized to serve political leaders' interests of nationalism, and how this is similar or different from the past (Harrison, 2001).

China's higher education (HE) provides an interesting case for studying the impact of cultural nationalism in the context of modernization. The First Opium War (1840–1842) forced China to open its door to the world, and traditional Chinese higher learning encountered Western models of HE for the first time. From then on, a dilemma—represented by the question of “What and how can Chinese culture borrow from Western culture without destroying what is typically (if not exclusively) Chinese?”—has been associated with the development of China. The whole picture of the interplay between Western and Chinese cultures from the nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century was extremely complicated as China had struggled to transform from a traditional empire into a modern state, and several factors had further complicated the situation, including the political changes, wars, and ideological shifts (Zarrow, 2012; Zhang, 1987). Although previous studies have already mapped the complexity in terms of the development of Chinese HE and its relationship with nation-building (Hayhoe, 1996; Marginson, 2018; Mok & Marginson, 2021; Yang, 2013), how “culture” has been politicized by political leaders and how

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this has influenced Chinese HE, especially over the last two decades, remains a perspective that is rarely been deployed.

Moreover, the literature has not thoroughly examined how the government has responded to the above dilemma since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, and how this new government response could or has influenced the direction of China's HE in the future. Cultural nationalism (i.e., "culture" is politicized to serve political leaders' interests of nationalism) is becoming increasingly relevant in today's China, given more and more illustrations (e.g., the recent emphasis on cultural self-confidence) are happening. As political leadership changes significantly affect society and HE, and the current government increasingly controls over HE and other areas of Chinese society, it is crucial to understand the dilemma of China's state ideology and HE trajectory from the perspective of cultural nationalism.

Therefore, this paper aims to fill these research gaps, using cultural nationalism as an important and useful lens to foster a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution of Chinese HE and its relationship with politics. We first introduce cultural nationalism as the theoretical framework and clarify the methodology employed in reviewing materials. We then trace the influence of cultural nationalism on Chinese HE from 1840 to 2021, focusing on how different Chinese political leaders have dealt with the dilemma of borrowing from Western culture while preserving Chinese culture, and how this affected Chinese HE. We show that various forms of cultural nationalism have underpinned the development of Chinese HE. In particular, we identify a strong cultural nationalism in today's China. Finally, we discuss the implications and limitations of this paper.

Cultural nationalism

Culture is multi-tiered, which ranges from easily observable things to those things that indicate people's substantial differences and are crucial for people to construct their identity and sense of belonging (Lin, 2022a). We take a more general approach and perceive culture as an umbrella term that contains beliefs, values, ways of life, norms, customs, social behavior, language, arts, and science and technology (ST), etc., of a group at a particular time. This understanding of culture is carried out throughout the paper, as it matches with the ambiguous nature and political usage of terms such as "Chinese culture" and "Western culture" in the review materials. The same principle is also applied to other terms that are intentionally used by the Chinese government and political figures in a vague way, such as "Chinese essence", "Chinese tradition", and "Chinese model". We did not mean to deny the value of exploring the changing meanings of these concepts over time and distinguishing different

components of them, but simply made this choice because this is not the focus of this paper.

Following this logic, we wanted to clarify that from our analysis, this paper would not be able to specify or answer questions such as "what is the distinctive Chinese approach to modernization?" or "what elements or perspectives on different Chinese culture (e.g., Confucianism, Daoism, and Chinese Buddhism) are embodied in political leaders' promotion of Chinese culture" because of two reasons. First, these terms were mainly used by the government and political figures as a political discourse/tool to gain public support and legitimize their governance; they never specified what these terms really mean and what they contain. Second, given that this study focuses on describing how Xi Jinping and other Chinese political leaders politicize culture and their nationalistic intentions of doing so, and that they often refer to Chinese culture/Western culture in a general way without specifying what they mean by Chinese culture/Western culture, it would be unethical and infeasible for this short paper to guess what they specifically mean when using Chinese culture/Western culture on different occasions. Although these questions are not the focus of this paper, they are good questions worth further exploring.

Nationalism, as a distinctly modern phenomenon, has various forms (e.g., ethnic nationalism, civic nationalism, and cultural nationalism) that are primarily defined based on an imagined shared race, origin, history, or cultural ties of a nation (Anderson, 2016; Lin & Jackson, 2021; Smith, 2010). In general, nationalism is closely associated with a particular approach to constructing what a nation is like. However, different forms of nationalism are not always compatible. For example, how national culture is constructed could be different from how national ethnicity/race is constructed. Thus, it is necessary to distinguish cultural nationalism from other forms of nationalism; and treating cultural nationalism simply as nationalism would lose nuance and richness of nationalism.

Like other forms of nationalism, cultural nationalism has been a prominent, complex, and controversial phenomenon across the world (e.g., Malaysia, India, Taiwan, Korea, Russia, and the United States), and its applications varied across different contexts (Barnett, 2015; Daniels, 2005). It was manifested in Germany in the early nineteenth century as the understanding that "it is solely by means of the common [cultural] trait of Germanness that we can avert the downfall of our nation threatened by its confluence with foreign peoples and once more win back a self that is self-supporting and incapable of any form of dependency" (Fichte, 2008, p. 11). A similar form of cultural nationalism that is closely tied to shared origins and culture, which indicated a closed membership, played a significant role in nationalist movements that established new nation-states in Europe such as Italy, Germany, and Ireland in the late 19th and early

twentieth centuries (Kohn, 1967; Weller, 2021). Currently, cultural nationalism as a theoretical framework has been applied in various disciplines (e.g., political sciences and cultural studies) to examine how it is manifested in many recent movements across nation-states in the west, including the fundamental British values in the United Kingdom, the insistence of cultural unity in France, the white Christian Americans' cultural supremacy in the United States, and the requirement of ethnic minorities' cultural identification for social solidarity in Russia (Lin, 2023; Yusupova, 2018).

In the non-Western contexts, due to the colonial and humiliating history, cultural nationalism has often been associated with an aspiration to modernize traditional culture in order to catch up and exceed their Western counterparts (Hsiau, 2000; Lin, 2023). As Lin (2023) pointed out,

Unlike North America and Europe where modernity has been seriously challenged, many Asian nation-states still consider modernity a desirable goal that can advance and strengthen their nation. Their colonial and humiliating history has led them to experience complex feelings towards their traditional culture (e.g. pride and shame) and western culture (e.g. fear and worship), and this motivated them to emphasize inheriting and modernizing traditional culture for catching up and exceeding their western counterparts. (p. 85)

Cultural nationalism in China shares some characteristics with other non-Western societies, including an identification of distinctive cultural traits, a nationalistic sentiment, a cultural pride, and a certain degree of xenophobia (Guo, 2004). However, China is different from other non-Western societies in a way that many contradictory phenomena associated with cultural nationalism have been co-existing during the examined period, including cultural arrogance, cultural nihilism, anti-traditional culture, cultural fever, the socialization and ideologization of culture, and the marketization of culture. In this sense, Chinese culture has always been hybrid, containing self-contradictory elements (e.g., traditional and modern, and socialist and capitalist). As a result, contemporary Chinese culture is hybrid and too complex to define, including traditional, patriarchal, Western, socialist, capitalist, and many other elements; and cultural nationalism is a playing field wherein different stakeholders compete to define authentic Chineseness and promote their paths to modernization (Lin, 2023).

Unfortunately, despite the richness of cultural nationalism in China, very few studies have examined this topic. Guo (2004) is a pioneer in this field. Given that he focused on four groups of cultural nationalists' (i.e., nationalist historians, Confucians, opponents of language reform and cultural linguists, and postcolonialists) construction of cultural nationalism from 1989 to 2004, he defined cultural nationalism as an unofficial nationalism that could sometimes be

fundamentally against the ideology of the government. This perspective of understanding cultural nationalism is different from our understanding. In this paper, we focus on Chinese "official" cultural nationalism, of which the forms and content are designed and controlled by the government. In this sense, we found Lin's (2023) definition of cultural nationalism particularly useful: "the ways that the government constructs and politicizes culture to serve Xi's interests of nationalism". In his research, Lin applied cultural nationalism in the fields of political sciences and China studies, and showed that

several nationalist rationales are embedded in Xi's politisation of culture. ... For Xi, who uses cultural nationalism to politicise culture and serve his nationalism, what is important is that there is a vague Chinese culture that can be referred to as a whole so that his rule can be maintained and strengthened; what happens to different concrete elements of Chinese culture is less significant.... Xi's cultural nationalism is consistent with his other nationalistic initiatives. (Lin, 2023, p. 98)

Lin's research serves as a proof that his definition of cultural nationalism is a useful theoretical framework that can offer new insights in understanding China and its higher education.

To better serve the focal points of this paper, we extend Lin's definition and define cultural nationalism as "the ways that different stakeholders (e.g., the emperors, scholar-officials, political leaders, and governments) construct and politicize culture to serve their interests of nationalism". Although cultural nationalism often overlaps and connects with other forms of nationalism (e.g., ethnic nationalism), this definition argues that in certain circumstances, treating culture independently is useful in gaining a deeper understanding of cultural nationalism. This is particular the case for examining Chinese political leaders' promotion of cultural nationalism, given that in their vague usage of culture, different elements of Chinese culture are not specifically and exclusively associated with any Chinese ethnic group. For example, Chinese political leaders always promote Confucianism as shared by all Chinese people, instead of specifically and exclusively belonging to ethnic-Han people.

Meanwhile, this definition recognizes that the cultural component has always been crucial in Chinese nationalism and connected with politics. Calhoun rightly observed that in authoritarian nation-states like China, nationalism can be understood as a discourse that refers to "the production of a cultural understanding and rhetoric which leads people to think and frame their aspirations in terms of the idea of nation and national identity" and an evaluation that denotes the "political and cultural ideologies that claim superiority for a particular nation" (Calhoun, 1997, p. 6). Moreover,

instead of perceiving Chinese cultural nationalism as a fixed concept, this definition allows it to be seen as a spectrum ranging from an arrogance that rejects Western culture, to selectively learning from the West to develop what is Chinese, and to discarding Chinese culture and comprehensively learning Western culture. The concrete forms that official cultural nationalism has taken across different periods since 1840 can be situated in different positions of the spectrum. Additionally, compared to the understandings of cultural nationalism in other societies, this definition better fits the Chinese context as it captures the special national conditions that since 1840, China has “faced strong shocks from the modern West and thus developed a defensive rhetoric of cultural nationalism to counteract [its perception of] inferiority” (Chen et al., 2020, p. 26); and from then on, Chinese HE mainly depended on Western models and there was “no real equilibrium” between Chinese and Western ideas of HE (Yang, 2013, p. 90).

This is essentially a conceptual paper, with evidence from different sources to support its theoretical arguments. To examine the different forms that cultural nationalism has taken from 1840 to 2021, and its effect on the development of Chinese HE, we reviewed multiple data sources published in this period, including historical texts, scholarly literature, government documents, and the speeches of political leaders (Bowen, 2009). Specifically, we applied different approaches in reviewing sources published in different periods. China went through dramatic political changes from 1840 to the early 2000s, the government’s various views on the topics mentioned are distributed throughout historical texts, edited books compiled by departments of the government (e.g., the Compilation and Translation Bureau), and scholarly literature. As many first-hand resources in this period are lost and/or hard to obtain, plus this research aims to grasp the main tendencies during this period regarding cultural nationalism rather than doing a comprehensive historical study (which is far beyond a scope of a paper), we largely rely on second-hand resources (Snyder, 2019). However, this does not mean that we cherry-picked those materials that support our arguments only or sacrificed historical accuracy. We have reviewed different sources that represent diverse views, which will be presented in the next section. Although some historical contents presented in the next section may have been used in previous studies, this paper originally interprets them from a cultural nationalism perspective.

In Xi’s era, the government’s views on the subject of HE are reflected in his speeches and other documents on its official website (<http://www.gov.cn/>). Given this is a relatively new period that has not been well-explored, we read each speech and document issued from “December 1, 2012 to December 31, 2021” one by one and focused on the content relevant to a substantive discussion of the following topics: (1) the government’s views on whether and how to borrow

Western culture for developing Chinese HE; (2) the government’s views on the relationship between Chinese and Western cultures in Chinese HE; and (3) the government’s views on the status of Chinese culture and HE in the world (Franzosi, 2008; Lin & Jackson, 2021). Representative content has been translated and presented in the next section.

Cultural nationalism and its effect on Chinese higher education

We found that cultural nationalism has consistently been a driving force of reforms in Chinese HE during the period under study. The various forms of cultural nationalism have complicated the combination of Western and Chinese cultures in Chinese HE. We have divided the development of cultural nationalism in Chinese HE into five periods based on the events that have significantly influenced Chinese society and HE, as this reveals the continuity and variations of cultural nationalism in HE over time.

From 1840 to 1911: a declining sense of cultural superiority

From the Opium Wars (1840–1842) to the late Qing reforms (1901–1911), China underwent a shift from a general rejection of Western culture to a selective acceptance of Western culture, while maintaining the core status of Chinese culture. This period, therefore, witnessed the fall of the traditional Chinese higher learning system and marked the beginning of China’s transformation toward a global HE system led by the West. During the process of declining cultural superiority, China’s cultural pride endured with a strong adherence to keeping tradition and some reluctance to learn from the West. Culture was constructed and politicized during this period to serve different nationalist interests, including promoting Sinocentrism, preserving the traditional societal and political system, propagandizing nationalist thoughts, and maintaining the government’s rule.

Ancient China had already developed a higher learning system before the arrival of Western ideas of HE in China (Li, 2000). Before the Opium Wars, many Chinese emperors viewed Western culture as inferior and unworthy of learning due to various reasons, such as arrogance or simply showing a political stance (Ding, 1994), though a few of them (e.g., Kangxi and Qianlong) were probably already aware of the existence of emerging power in the remote West (Harrison, 2001; Hostetler, 2001). This cultural pride, which influenced Chinese higher learning by largely downplaying the development of HE in the West, served the emperors’ interests of promoting Sinocentrism.

However, the First Opium War forced Chinese emperors and scholar-officials (the highest rank of government

officials in imperial China) to recognize the strength of Western military power. Some then argued that Western ST had originated from ancient China, and that this meant it could be selectively learned (Ding, 1994). For example, in 1842, Wei Yuan, a comparatively open-minded scholar-official, forcefully suggested that China should learn the powerful techniques of the barbarians [the West], and do so to control them (Wei, 2011). China's defeat in the Second Opium War (1856–1869) elicited more support from Chinese scholar-officials for introducing Western ST while maintaining traditional Chinese culture as the basis of Chinese society. In 1861, a government official named Feng (2002) put forward an influential statement, emphasizing that “the essential basis of Chinese society is moral principles and Confucian ethical codes, supplemented by other countries' techniques, to achieve prosperity” (p. 57). In the second half of the nineteenth century, this idea was adopted and further developed by Zhang (1998), a top government official of the late Qing dynasty, as the doctrine—“traditional learning as the essence, new-style learning for its usefulness” (p. 121).

The above ideas expressed by Chinese emperors and scholar-officials clearly served their interests of preserving the traditional system and promoting the following nationalist thoughts to the public: that certain aspects of Chinese culture are necessary for China's development, a skepticism about learning Western culture, and an insistence on keeping Chineseness. This construction and politicization of culture affected the development of Chinese higher learning by fostering the government to adopt a dual approach to higher learning: Western culture can be learned in an effort to strengthen China, but the influence of the West must be controlled strictly. In 1861, officials founded the Self-Strengthening Movement, which imported ST subjects from the West into Chinese HE (Luo, 1999). However, these officials nevertheless advocated that the Confucian classics were an irreplaceably important basis of China's cultural and moral standards (Zhang, 1987); they neither understood nor wished to establish modern HE in the Western sense. The imperial examination system did not change, as it continued to prioritize the Confucian classics and neglect ST (Guan, 2017).

During the final two decades of the late Qing dynasty, the emphasis on incorporating Western knowledge and a reduction in the focus on traditional knowledge within higher learning institutions was also motivated by an attempt to sustain the government's rule. China's defeat in the First Sino–Japanese War (1894–1895) was the first major blow to its sense of cultural superiority (Bays, 1978). Numerous progressives called for reforms of China's education system, which led to the establishment of the first Western-style universities approved by the Guangxu Emperor: National Beiyang University (now Tianjin University) in 1895, with Western ST as its main focus; and Peking University in

1898. Both were significantly influenced by Western ideas and models. After the invasion of China by the Eight-Nation Alliance in 1900–1901, the Qing government decreased its emphasis on Chinese cultural superiority, as it sought to save the nation from extinction by implementing sweeping reforms (Zhang, 1987). In particular, in 1904 the government abolished the imperial examination system, thereby encouraging Chinese people to learn the Western knowledge system and to pay greater attention to ST (Yuan et al., 1904). The government decided to build a modern HE system structured around scientific disciplines borrowed from the West (Zhang et al., 1993), but retained the Chinese essence as its core. For instance, traditional knowledge was not fully adapted to the discipline-based Western knowledge system, and the continued priority status of the Confucian classics meant that ST subjects were not given equal importance. However, these reforms ended when the Qing dynasty collapsed in 1911. From the perspective of cultural nationalism, this leaning toward learning more from Western knowledge while keeping less Chinese aspects was a temporary strategy to save the nation so that the government's rule could be maintained.

From 1911 to 1949: enduring westernization to save the nation

As the Republican period began, culture was constructed and politicized by different governments and parties to serve their nationalist interests of securing the legitimacy of governance, promoting the path for modernization, and winning the public. This cultural nationalism significantly influenced the development of Chinese HE, as the government's willingness to experience hardship to restore China's greatness led it to support extensive institutional Westernization (Levenson, 1965; Luo & Ge, 1998). Chinese HE thus became more closely modeled on the HE of Western societies (Luo & Ge, 1998; Zhou, 1991).

It is worth clarifying that although we see “enduring Westernization to save the nation” as a common thread running through the period, we do not mean to suggest that it was totally smooth without ups and downs or to oversimplify the history of the Republic. Instead, we acknowledge that this period was highly dynamic and complex as different political powers, including warlords, various sections of the Kuomintang (KMT), and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), were active and significantly influenced the central government for a period (Fenby, 2009). Despite the drastic political upheaval, one phenomenon in Chinese HE was particularly prominent during the period: different legitimate governments initiated a series of reforms designed to borrow Western ideas of HE and construct a modern Chinese HE system, as demonstrated by three typical examples.

First, the debates and movements related to China's response to the West had a profound influence on Chinese HE when the Beiyang government was in power. In 1912, the Beiyang government started to directly learn from the West. In 1919, students gathered together to protest against the government's weak response to the Treaty of Versailles, which is called the May Fourth movement. The movement promoted a suspicious attitude toward traditional Chinese culture and encouraged a full embrace of Western ideas such as Democracy and Science, and accelerated the emergence of many political leaders of the next coming decades, including those of the CCP (Mitter, 2004). From 1912 to 1922, a German model that features academic freedom and autonomy served as the most influential template for establishing modern HEIs in China (Xiong, 1983). In 1922, the government promoted a U.S.-style HE system that understates the separation between theoretical and applied disciplines and highlights social responsibility, which met the pragmatic need of Chinese society (Hayhoe, 1996). The reforms on HEIs were good examples of how managing cultural relationships between China and the West was politicized to secure the legitimacy of the government's governance and win the public.

The second example is that to ensure Western models of HE were used to save and rebuild China, the nationalist government made numerous attempts in the 1930s and 1940s to strengthen the identity-related components of Chinese HE. During the Second Sino–Japanese War began in 1937, the Nationalist government emphasized that learning from the West must not be done at the cost of forgetting Chinese culture and losing Chineseness. Accordingly, the head of the government Chiang Kai-shek started the New Life Movement, which aimed to promote a civilized Chinese life that was to be guided by four traditional Chinese virtues: *li* (ritual); *yi* (rightness or duty); *lian* (integrity or honesty); and *chi* (sense of shame). The government considered these four virtues as being of primary importance to save and rebuild the nation, and that Western knowledge and techniques were of secondary importance (Chiang, 1934). Based on the belief that “people need knowledge and techniques because they want to do good. Otherwise, knowledge and techniques can only be instruments of dishonorable deeds”, Chiang stated:

only people who hold on to these virtues can use advanced Western knowledge and techniques to save and rebuild the nation, and those who do not have these Chinese virtues will only utilize Western knowledge and techniques to destroy the nation and serve their personal interests. (Chiang, 1934)

Here, culture was reconstructed and politicized by Chiang and his nationalist government to provide legitimacy of his governance, promote his path for modernization, and win the public.

Accordingly, the movement sought to promote moral education and character development in students, with a focus on cultivating a sense of national pride and loyalty to the government. This resulted in changes to the curriculum, with courses on subjects such as ethics, Chinese literature, and history being emphasized. Specifically, the government used censorship to ensure that HE curricula heightened students' national spirit. In the humanities, there was much emphasis on using national history to shape students' Chinese identity (Qian, 1989). Many subjects in the social sciences (e.g., sociology) that were imported from Western countries were also Sinicized to serve national interests (Wu, 2010).

The third example is the CCP's construction and politicization of culture and its application in Chinese HE during the 1930s and 1940s, a period when KMT was still considered the governing party, and the CCP's influence was growing. As mentioned, several founders (e.g., Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu) and important figures (e.g., Zhou Enlai) of the CCP went through or were the leaders of the May Fourth Movement. They were suspicious of traditional Chinese culture, considered it as old and elitism and was harmful to the mass, and believed that some Western ideas (Marxism and communism in particular) and radical political actions (e.g., revolution) and attitudes were what China needs (Leibold, 2007). This attitude contrasted with Chiang Kaishek's skeptical attitude toward Western ideas and his efforts on preserving traditional Chinese culture and values, as manifested by the New Life Movement.

Accordingly, the CCP established some universities that follow its attitude toward Chinese and Western cultures to serve its purposes, including winning peasants and workers over and starting a Communist revolution. For example, the CCP founded China Red Army School in 1931 in Jiangxi. This school was renamed China Red Army College in 1933 and Counter-Japanese University of the Red Army in 1937. Given the political consideration behind the establishment of those universities, the party leaders used Western ideas including Marxism and communism as guiding ideologies, and focused on politicizing Western and Chinese cultures.

From 1949 to 1978: developing the nation through a politicized view on culture

When the CCP came to power and established the People's Republic of China in 1949, Soviet influence inspired the Chinese government to tighten its leadership and control over all HE sectors and highly politicize them. In relation, political missions including socialist transformation and nation-building became the main themes of HE (Xiong, 1983). As the political environment and Chairman Mao's thoughts changed significantly during this period, cultural nationalism was manifested as a pragmatically and strategically borrowing whatever useful elements of Western and

Chinese cultures to serve different political priorities and purposes (e.g., seeking the legitimacy of the CCP and building a new socialist country).

Mao Zedong's cultural nationalism adopted "critique and inheritance" to deal with the interaction between Western and traditional Chinese cultures (PEP, 2008). As the main concern for him was ideological differences, he did not provide a clear definition of Western and Chinese cultures, nor did he offer specific answers to questions such as the definition of cultural pride, the essence of Chinese culture, the fundamental elements of Western culture, or the meaning of Chineseness. Instead, he took a political and strategic stance to selectively and strategically define what elements of Western and traditional Chinese culture can be borrowed: anything that does not challenge the political ideology or the legitimacy of the CCP and can serve China's development. Notably, his approach to (re)constructing and politicizing culture was shaped by his different priorities of nationalist interests, influenced by China's domestic crises (e.g., the Cultural Revolution) and international relations.

Mao's cultural nationalism had significant consequences for his design of HE. As he believed that ST subjects were the most useful in developing a socialist nation and criticized humanities and social sciences (HSS) subjects for promoting capitalist values and Western models for HEIs (Li, 2005; PEP, 2008). Accordingly, HEIs established numerous subjects in the fields of technology and engineering, such as steel, geology, aviation, mining, and hydraulic engineering (Song, 2010). In contrast, HSS subjects were criticized for their hidden bourgeois ideas, and some were banned (Song, 2010). Academics in the HSS considered bourgeoisie by the government were involved in the early 1950s campaign aimed at uniting, educating, and reforming academics under the guidance of Marxism-Leninism (Fu, 1993). Meanwhile, to ensure Chinese HE did not follow a Western model (e.g., the U.S. model), he required HEIs and academics to show loyalty to the Party and its leader, promote state ideology, and adopt a Chinese socialist approach to HE (Hayhoe, 1996; Li, 2005; Shi, 2016). This demonization of Western culture and the emphasis on Chinese socialist culture served his nationalist interest in justifying and securing his rule.

The numerous campaigns that he launched to denounce the parts of traditional Chinese culture that he considered old-fashioned and harmful, which could be considered as serving his nationalist interest of promoting his redefinition of what is good for China's modernization, also affected Chinese HE. For example, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Mao required universities to emphasize social practice with roots in China's reality instead of focusing on knowledge that was divorced from reality (Hayhoe, 1996). Based on Mao's view that "the more knowledge you have, the more reactionary you are", universities were required to stop regular enrollment through the national college entrance

examination. Instead, the government initiated the Down to the Countryside Movement, in which "educated youths" in urban areas were sent to live and work in rural areas to be re-educated by the peasantry and to better understand Chinese society. During this period, numerous scholars were persecuted, and many talented students were denied admission to HEIs and forced to work in villages. The Cultural Revolution has had a long-lasting negative impact on Chinese HE, especially in terms of lost talent, scorn for knowledge, and a decline in the quality of HE (Deng, 2017).

From 1978 to 2012: omens of strong cultural nationalism

Between 1978 and 2012, China witnessed changes in political leadership from Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin and then to Hu Jintao. Although their attitudes toward Western and Chinese cultures varied, they all showed resistance to capitalist ideology and an increasing emphasis on internationalization and Sinicization, which significantly influenced the government's design of HE. This period was special because of the appearance of signals of strong cultural nationalism that emphasizes not only selectively learning Western culture to catch up to and exceed the West, but also China's national culture and its contributions to the world. The omens of strong cultural nationalism have four aspects.

First, generally speaking, this period witnessed a government's increasing emphasis on the Sinicization and export of political ideologies. Many dominant political ideologies (e.g., Marxist-Leninism and socialism) in China during this period were originally from the West, though they might have been Sinicized in the historical process and creatively embedded in China. Although Mao proposed the term "Sinicization of Marxism" in 1938, he mainly considered it as a political slogan and movement to arouse the public's nationalistic sentiment to fight against capitalism and "the West". It was not until Deng Xiaoping came to power that he and his successors started to (1) systematically incorporate the Sinicization of Marxism and socialism into policies and educational resources, and (2) highlight that the Sinicized Marxism and socialism are different from their original meanings because Chinese wisdom has been added (though they did not specify what Chinese wisdom meant), and that these innovative Chinese political ideologies should be exported because they can offer some insights to the world. It was under this background that the perplexing and seemingly self-contradictory political statements about Western and Chinese culture made by political leaders during this period can be better understood. More details about this point will be given below when discussing other three aspects.

Second, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the government prioritized modernization and internationalization to ensure social stability and seek political legitimacy while

culture was constructed and politicized to serve these nationalist interests. The Cultural Revolution ended with the death of Mao in 1976, and the government implemented a policy of reform and opening up in 1978. This policy featured a vigilant attitude toward the radical ideas of Mao's period (Tang, 1995) and reintroduced Western culture to China (Deng, 1994a). However, China's wide-ranging learning from the West in the 1980s and 1990s was not a repeat of the overall Westernization of the Republic of China. Instead, with the focus during this period on further development rather than a desperate effort to save the nation, the government selectively borrowed elements of Western culture that were likely to complement a socialist path and would be integrated into Chinese culture (Deng, 1994a, 1994b). Culture was constructed and politicized here to serve the government's interest of promoting economic reform. The government took a pragmatic approach to developing the country so that the legitimacy of CCP can be consolidated and that ideological and psychological obstacles to market-oriented economic reform can be removed (Zhao, 2004).

Given the government's attitude to culture, Chinese HE was rehabilitated and sought to catch up with its Western counterparts. The government increasingly abandoned the Soviet model and turned to Western Europe and North America for the inspiration needed to reshape Chinese HE. Previously, China's approach to HEIs had centered on insulating China from Western capitalist countries, due to the influence of the Soviet Union and the emphasis on the ideological struggle against the non-Marxist, bourgeois political ideas. In 1977, the government reinstated the National College Entrance Examination and rebuilt the HE system (Deng, 1977; State Council, 1977). Deng also made many efforts to reduce the effects of the Soviet model so that the policy of reform and opening up can be truly carried out. In education, this orientation toward openness is reflected in his famous words in 1983: "Education should face modernization, the world and the future". For example, he regarded reforming teaching methods and updating textbooks as requirements to enable China to gain the latest Western knowledge. At his instruction, textbooks and teaching materials for nearly all subjects were imported from the United States, the United Kingdom, West Germany, France, and other countries (MoE, 2019). University disciplines were reshaped to fit Western templates, and numerous social science subjects were re-established.

Yet Deng's intention was not to follow the West but for China to Sinicize Western HE systems as a means of strengthening Chinese HE (Deng, 1994a). This was particularly the case by the end of his term. Following the collapse of numerous Communist regimes worldwide in the late 1980s and early 1990s and China's political turmoil in the late 1980s (e.g., the pro-democracy movement and the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests), Deng was increasingly

aware of the potential risks of cultural erosion by the decadence of Western culture to the legitimacy of CCP, and thus tightened ideological and political control over education (Deng, 1994a; Hayhoe, 1993; Lin, 2022b; Zhao, 2004). This increasing skepticism of and resistance to certain elements of Western culture served Deng's nationalist interest in maintaining the rule of CCP. Interestingly, although Marxism, socialism, and capitalism were all from the West, Deng considered them as helpful Western cultures to China's development as long as they could be Sinicized and added the alleged "Chinese characteristics" (through what he meant by this term was unclear). Thus, these "Western cultures" were often promoted in education during his leadership.

Third, Jiang Zemin, the successor of Deng, further politicized culture to serve the nationalist interest of maintaining the CCP's rule and the current political system while advocating for learning from the West. This has had a significant impact on the acquisition and dissemination of Chinese and Western knowledge through HE, which represents the typical form of cultural nationalism trends in recent decades. Similar to Deng, Jiang warned that "the purpose of learning and borrowing from others is to make our own national culture grow. If we lose this and worship or copy the values of Western capitalism, we will only follow suit and become their vassals" (LROCPCCC, 1999, p. 2152). He repeatedly highlighted the importance of adopting a "scientific" attitude toward traditional Chinese culture and Western culture:

Under the guidance of Marxism, we strive to inherit and develop all outstanding cultural traditions of the Chinese nation, learn and absorb all outstanding cultural achievements of foreign countries, and constantly create and promote a socialist culture with Chinese characteristics. (Jiang, 2001)

As mentioned, Marxism and socialism were seen as originally from the West by Chinese people. Interestingly, here Jiang considered Marxism as something beyond traditional Chinese culture and Western culture and can be equated to a scientific attitude toward them. In this sense, it reflected that Jiang continued Deng's pragmatic approach to culture instead of Mao's "all about politics" approach, and that he further downplayed the importance of "political conflict" in judging whether certain elements of Western culture can be learned to develop China.

Although Jiang paid great attention to ideological and political differences between China and the West, he also adopted many policies to encourage China to learn from the West. Two contexts of this seemingly self-contradictory gesture should be noted: (1) the Western countries opposed China's harsh crackdown in Tiananmen Square after 1989, so he was keen to pose a more friendly gesture toward the Western world; and (2) China was trying very hard to get

into WTO and win the chance to hold the Olympic Games. This self-contradictory attitude affected China's HE in the following ways.

On the one hand, Jiang advocated for the adoption of Western knowledge and practices at both the institutional and individual levels in HE. In the *Outline of China's Education Reform and Development*, Jiang clearly stated that ST was a primary productive force and that Chinese HEIs should take advantage of advanced Western ST to contribute to the nation's development (CCCPC & SC, 1993). He promoted the importing of textbooks and teaching materials from Western countries and used bilingual education as a criterion to assess the quality of HE (MoE, 2001). Jiang also established the China Scholarship Council to regulate policies regarding studying abroad and overseas returnees. In particular, Jiang increased government funding for Chinese students to study abroad to gain advanced knowledge, and instituted policies to persuade students studying abroad to return to China and use their knowledge and skills to contribute to China's development (Zhu & Zhang, 2017).

On the other hand, Jiang had to make extra efforts to reconstruct and politicize culture in a way of maintaining the legitimacy of CCP, securing social stability, and appeasing the public in response to many domestic crises in the society throughout the 1990s, such as "the widespread demise of communist ideology and 'three crises of faith': a crisis of faith in socialism, in Marxism, and in the Party" (Zhao, 2004, p. 211). For example, he used the patriotic education campaign to foster national self-esteem and pride, enhance the nation's spirit and cohesion, and build socialism with Chinese characteristics (Wang, 2008). In relation, he called for HE to promote traditional Chinese culture under the guidance of socialist ideology (Jiang, 2006), stating "teaching and research must be guided by Marxism and the theory of building socialism with Chinese characteristics" (CCCPC & SC, 1993). Again, he never specified what the "Chinese characteristics" were or which traditional Chinese culture should be promoted. His another move in HE was initiating a strategy of globalizing HE, including establishing Confucius Institutes and encouraging scholars to publish internationally (Lu, 2019; Sun, 2003). This move was conducted in the name of countering Western cultural hegemony and enhancing the influence and appeal of Chinese culture. Yet, it was also used as a political strategy to legitimize the Party's power within China, by projecting an image of rising China on the international stage, in contrast to the weak China which suffered a century of humiliation (Zhao, 2004).

Fourth, during the Hu Jintao period from 2004 to 2012, the government maintained and promoted Jiang's policy of politicizing culture to serve its nationalist interests. The seemingly stable policies fostered the strong cultural nationalism of the next period. Like his predecessors, Hu was cautious about the erosion of Western culture in

people's minds and emphasized national culture to continuously secure political legitimacy. Notably, Western political thoughts (including socialism) are crucial in his construction of national culture, though some may argue that they have been Sinicized and thus are not Western anymore. For example, he stated:

We must be fully aware that international hostile forces are stepping up efforts to implement their strategies of Westernizing and dividing China, with ideology and culture being key areas of their long-term infiltration. We must develop a national, scientific, and popular socialist culture geared toward modernization, the world, and the future. We must cultivate a high degree of cultural self-awareness and self-confidence, raise the cultural level of the whole nation, increase the country's cultural soft power, advance and enrich Chinese culture, and strive to build a country with a strong socialist culture. (Hu, 2012a, pp. 3–4)

For political concerns (e.g., convincing Chinese citizens that China is not a "Sick Man" anymore), Hu highlighted the importance of expanding China's global influence through cultural exports, which had a major effect on Chinese HE. He required HE to emphasize China's historical and cultural traditions and disseminate them to society and the world (Hu, 2012b). He went further than his predecessors in highlighting the "Sinicization of HE" and the internationalization of HE (Hu, 2012b). During this era, the government implemented numerous policies designed to build a HE system with "Chinese characteristics", a "Chinese style" and "an imposing Chinese manner". The relevant publications were the *Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Program for Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)*, *Opinions on Accelerating the Construction of Philosophy and Social Sciences with Chinese Characteristics* (2004), and *Opinions on the Quality Improvement of Philosophy and Social Sciences Research in Higher Education Institutions* (2006). These policies emphasized the combination of outstanding overseas educational resources and China's HE system, Sino–foreign cooperation in education, and Chinese HEIs' establishment of overseas campuses (Yang, 2010). Unfortunately, from the political discourse in these policies, it remained unclear what a HE system with "Chinese characteristics", a "Chinese style" or "an imposing Chinese manner" really mean.

Since 2012: strong cultural nationalism

Today, China features a strong cultural nationalism that places less emphasis on learning from the West, and more emphasis on cultural confidence, the Chinese dream of the rejuvenation of the nation, and building a Chinese model of HE (Douglass, 2021; Lin, 2023). This form of cultural

nationalism has been reflected in many nationalistic homilies and actions promoted during Xi's tenure, such as "being confident in the Chinese socialist path, theory, system and culture" (Xi, 2016b), the strengthening of "Chinese discourse power" and "cultural soft power" (Xi, 2014a), a stricter control over the internet, and an increasing control and censorship over using textbooks written by Western authors in HEIs.

Notably, this cultural nationalism is different from the form in the previous period because since Xi Jinping became the president, he has been centralizing power and, to some extent, departing from the collective leadership practices of his post-Mao predecessors; and he largely shifted the pragmatic approach to culture back to the "it-is-all-about-politics" approach (Lee, 2017). In this sense, cultural nationalism in this period is more like the form in Mao's period because (1) they all prioritize the importance of political struggle in judging which elements of Western and Chinese culture can be used to develop China. and (2) like the strong Mao's personal feature associated with cultural nationalism in his period, cultural nationalism since 2012 has a strong Xi's personal feature. For example, he has changed the constitution and could be "president for life". Various channels related to culture, including school textbooks, media, and cultural and artistic works, have also been required to praise and promote Xi and his thoughts (Lin, 2023). However, cultural nationalism in Xi's period is different from Mao's period because unlike Mao who largely isolated China from the world, Xi aims to more significantly influence the world.

Since Xi came to power in 2012, the government's emphasis on national culture and a Chinese model of HE reached new heights. In his report to the 19th National Congress of the CCP, Xi (2017) emphasized the need to strengthen cultural self-confidence and promote Chinese socialist culture, which he regarded as the cornerstone of a great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. In relation, Xi summarized his vision for the direction of Chinese HE:

The Party's and nation's needs for higher education to serve their development are more urgent than ever. The world-class universities we want to build are first-class universities of socialism with Chinese characteristics. China's higher education should be based on an overall strategy to rejuvenate the Chinese nation, and on promoting the country's prosperity and development. (Xi, 2021a)

To what extent Xi's discourse and moves are out of political concerns and truly reflect cultural confidence is controversial, and that his usage of terms such as first-class universities of socialism with Chinese characteristics was extremely vague and hard to decipher, but one thing is certain: his nationalistic vision has been implemented in various government policies and has had a significant

influence on the orientation of Chinese HE, especially in terms of its anti-Western sentiment, scholarly publications, university ranking and evaluation, discipline construction, curriculum development, and enhanced global influence.

Specifically, the anti-Western sentiment was clearly exemplified by the government's *Opinions on Strengthening and Improving Ideological and Political Work in The New Era*, issued in 2021. This policy stated that HEIs should fight against "corrosive" Western values and ideologies to protect the socialist nature of Chinese HE. It clarified that the leadership of the government and guiding ideology in HE should be strengthened, the criteria used in selecting, managing, and evaluating researchers and teachers should include their political mindset, and that ideological and political education should be further integrated into all academic disciplines (MoE, 2021).

Regarding scholarly publications, after Xi came to power in 2012, the government began to warn against the prioritization of Western standards, including the prioritization of journals indexed by international citation indices like the Sciences Citation Index and Social Sciences Citation Index (MoE & MoST, 2020; Xu, 2021), and to view Western influence on Chinese HE as a threat to cultural self-confidence. This shift in policy is a response to past programs aimed at encouraging academics to publish in international journals, and using academics' numbers of international publications as a key criterion for university evaluation and academic promotion. Accordingly, recent policies underline the importance of publishing in domestic journals and of having a demonstrable effect on China's society, economy, and national security (GOSC, 2021; MoE, 2020; MoE & MoST, 2020). For example, *Opinions on Promoting the Prosperity of Academic Journals* states that "academic research should be based on China's reality and respond to practical concerns. Papers should be written on the Motherland and closely serve the Party and nation's central works and strategic tasks" (PD, MoE, & MoST, 2021). In *Opinions on Eliminating the Unhealthy "Paper-Only" Orientation in the Evaluation of Humanities and Social Sciences Research in Higher Education Institutions*, the government opposed Chinese researchers who "deliberately dwarf or vilify China" or "damage national sovereignty, security, and national interests" in pursuit of international publication (MoE, 2020). However, the government nevertheless regards international publication as a crucial way of showing cultural confidence, and thus encourages researchers to publish studies that focus on the good sides of Chinese culture as a means of conveying the Chinese voice to the world. This reflects the self-contradictory nature of Xi's cultural nationalism.

As to university ranking and evaluation, the government has made it clear that Chinese HE needs to establish its own ranking and evaluation system, rather than following the

West. During his visit to the Renmin University of China in 2022, Xi stated that

China has a unique history, a unique culture, and a unique national condition, the construction of world-class universities with Chinese characteristics cannot follow behind and copy others or simply take foreign universities as the standard and model, but take root in the land of China and start a new road. (Xinhuanet, 2022)

Coincidentally, soon after his visit, three leading Chinese HEIs (i.e., Nanjing University, Renmin University, and Lanzhou University) decided to no longer participate in international league tables and rankings systems. It is anticipated that more universities will follow suit due to the political environment and the increasing nationalistic tendency in China.

In terms of discipline construction, the government is encouraging Chinese HEIs to develop a Chinese approach for both HSS and ST subjects to show the advantages of such an approach to the world. For example, the government has emphasized the urgency of constructing philosophy and social sciences programs with Chinese characteristics in HE (CCCPC, 2017; Xi, 2016a), and similar guidance has been provided for ST subjects. In Xi's vision, building a strong nation with world-class ST is central to the development of cultural confidence and the rejuvenation of the nation (Xi, 2021b). Thus, Xi has stated on many occasions (such as at scientific symposia) that Chinese ST subjects cannot rely on second-hand Western knowledge and become what he calls "technical vassals" of Western countries; rather, they must have Chinese characteristics and take control of core technology (Xi, 2013, 2014b). However, this faces serious challenges in reality. For example, although some national think tanks have been formed to figure out how to construct philosophy and social sciences programs with Chinese characteristics in HE, no concrete program has been put forward because what are truly "Chinese characteristics" remains disputable.

In terms of curriculum development, the government requires HEIs to closely monitor the use of Western curricula and to reject the promotion of Western values (Beijing Daily, 2015). The government has also sought to enhance education in traditional Chinese culture and values through the curricula used at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, aiming to nurture students who are proud of their Chinese identity and are alert to Western values. For example, HEIs have been required to deepen education on socialism with Chinese characteristics, traditional Chinese culture, socialist core values and the "Chinese dream" for students, and to inculcate "Xi Jinping thought" in students' minds through textbooks and teaching. However, in reality, this often remains a political slogan/declaration because no

specific guidance was provided by the government and many HEIs do not know how to carry it out except by simply adding more patriotic and political education content.

Finally, the government expects HE to increase its global influence by promoting Chinese culture, opening overseas campuses, and exporting the Chinese experiences of HE. For example, the government regards the "going global" of HSS as a key approach to improving China's discursive power (Gao & Zheng, 2020; Xi, 2016a; Xu, 2019). The government has also implemented several policies to encourage Chinese HEIs to open overseas campuses to enhance their global reputation and influence and to demonstrate the achievements and effectiveness of the Chinese model of HE. Relevant policies can be found in publications including *Opinions on Further Strengthening the Quality Assurance of Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Higher Education Institutions* (2013) and *Opinions on Doing a Good Job in Opening up Education to the Outside World in the New Period* (2016). This move is by no means non-controversial and smooth. In fact, the success of opening overseas campuses (e.g., Xiamen University Malaysia) and Confucius Institutes is limited. Many of them have encountered challenges and criticisms, such as host countries' suspicion of their hidden intentions and political considerations, them being China's overseas propaganda tools and a means of advancing China's soft power internationally, their censorship of content taught (e.g., topics related to freedom, democracy, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang), the possibility of industrial espionage, and the conflicts between the Institutes and the host government's policies (e.g., during the Covid-19 pandemic) (Cohen, 2016; Perez-Garcia & Nierga, 2021).

Along with these nationalistic moves, some features of the current Chinese HE remain largely Western, which could be the obstacles to establishing a Chinese model of HE from the government's view. For example, the current push toward creating "world-class universities" (or "first-class universities") still adopts the metrics that are very largely Western. According to the nationalistic trend happening in the last ten years, it is likely that these "Western evil legacies" would be the next focal points of the reform of Chinese HE, that is, being removed or Sincized in the near future.

Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis demonstrated that cultural nationalism closely links to politics, and although the form taken by cultural nationalism has varied throughout Chinese history, it has continuously and significantly influenced Chinese HE. Specifically, the first continuity across the identified five periods lies in the insistence of maintaining and strengthening the so-called "Chinese core" by absorbing what is useful from the West. Although there are significant variations

regarding why the core should be maintained, what the “Chinese core” is, and which Western elements should be adsorbed to develop the core, this “core” business never goes away. The second continuity is that because of the inevitable interaction between China and the West, what is typically (if not exclusively) Chinese and what is purely Western in the cultural domain becomes increasingly difficult (if not impossible) to decipher. Any attempt to do so would risk inviting criticisms from diverse stakeholders and sides or even dividing the nation and losing control. This was partially responsible for the ambiguous usage of terms such as “Chinese characteristics” in political leaders’ discourse, because they wanted to use these terms in a general way so that the majority of people of the nation can be united and follow their governance. The fundamental reasons underpinning the continuities are that (1) different political leaders all constructed the Chinese nation as if it is a homogenous nation that has a core significantly different from other nations, and that (2) globalization and global migration have increasingly made the task of finding this core difficult, not just for China, but also for many other nations.

Despite the vague expressions in political discourse, some significant variations have been identified. In general, we identified two approaches to culture that guided political leaders’ different answers regarding why the Chinese core should be maintained, what the “Chinese core” is, and how to develop the Chinese core by absorbing Western elements: a more practical approach and a more “all-about-politics” approach. The five period witnessed a general shift from a more “all-about-politics” approach to a more practical approach, then shifting back to an “all-about-politics” approach. The fundamental reasons underpinning the variations are (1) the situations that China faced in different periods were very different, such as in danger of extinction, turmoil, and relatively stable; and (2) political leaders in different periods often had diverse nationalistic interests, such as saving the nation from extinction, consolidating the nation’s independence, and projecting China influencing global to legitimize political decisions and strengthen personal rule.

This paper thus has three contributions. First, it contributes to the literature by adding a cultural perspective to the discussion of nationalism in the educational field (Hammond, 2016; Kim & Jung, 2019). This paper demonstrates that cultural nationalism is a useful perspective from which to examine the development of Chinese HE. According to Anderson (2016), nationalism and the state are closely intertwined. The state often considers cultivating and promoting national identity and other nationalistic ideologies through education as a significant part of the nation-state building project and crucial for the establishment of a unified nation-state. Our analysis shows that this is particularly true in China. We confirm that certain benign aspects of cultural

nationalism could or have played a positive role in enhancing the solidarity of national community and strengthening national identity (Gans, 2000). In China, the discourse such as developing cultural self-confidence, maintaining Chinese characteristics, and exporting Chinese culture becomes a necessary strategy for the government to maintain political legitimacy and win public support (Wang, 2014).

We also reflect on the malignant aspects of cultural nationalism. Critics have criticized cultural nationalism for promoting inward looking and nationalistic sentiment and actions that are, to some extent, xenophobic and in contrast to the cultivation of the cosmopolitan and multicultural citizenry (Barnett, 2015; Daniels, 2005; Lin, 2022a, 2023); in many cases cultural nationalism promotes a homogenous national identity, cultural superiority, and an idea that a culture is exclusiveness shared by national members, as illustrated by the situation in Japan (Yoshino, 1992). China once perceived itself as the center of the world, but was defeated several times by the West and suffered a century of humiliation. This history has made China struggle with a complex combination of cultural arrogance and cultural cringe. In recent decades, the rapid economic development and population growth make China emerge as a major power again (Cheung, 2014), how to rationally and appropriately treat its own culture and other cultures has become an urgent yet tricky issue.

Second, this paper explores the government’s politicization of culture and its complicated impact on HE, which is closely tied to the tension between adopting Western and traditional Chinese culture, a common thread that runs through those examined periods. The findings highlight that cultural nationalism is a political project, as national traditions and cultures are “invented” by people in power to legitimize their governance, promote nationalist doctrines, and distract attention from domestic crises (Breuille, 1993; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2013). In this context, the dynamics of Chinese HE have been influenced in a top-down way. We remind readers that what the government claims in public may not reflect its real political agenda. While the party-state and political leaders often emphasize their adherence to traditional Chinese culture and values, their definitions of “Chinese characteristics” always are selective and prioritize certain elements that reinforce their authority, legitimacy, and policy objectives. For example, elements that can help strengthen the hierarchy and their governance often receive the most attention, such as the emphasis on the importance of education, filial piety, respect for elders, teachers, and authority, the maintenance of strong family relationships and collectivism, and allegiance. This selective and partial embrace of Sinic tradition in Chinese HE has puzzled and created numerous dilemmas for stakeholders (e.g., policy-makers, university leaders, teachers, and students) in terms of aspects such as teacher-student relations (a more equal

relationship as promoted in Western philosophy or a more hierarchical relationship as in Sinic tradition?), pedagogical methods (indoctrination or critical inquiry?), definitions of knowledge (Chinese traditional emphasis on practical knowledge or Western distinction between pure and applied knowledge?), notions of leadership (decentralization of authority or centralization?), and university autonomy (controlled by politics or independent from politics?). In this sense, the nationalistic moves of the government and their impact on Chinese HE are highly complicated and deserve more critical and careful examinations in the future.

We highlight that the cultural nationalism is somehow self-contradictory as it contains two competing directions simultaneously, which relates to the politicization of culture and reflects the transition between a globally emerging China and an emerged China: (1) cutting China's links to the world and relying on what is Chinese to develop the nation, and (2) actively participating in the world affairs, being truly confident about Chinese culture, and believing that the interaction of Chinese and Western cultures would only test and strengthen Chinese culture rather than destroying it. The cultural nationalism and its dilemma have also significantly influenced the field of Chinese HE, as shown by HEIs' self-contradictory focus on developing a Chinese model of HE (i.e., HE with Chinese characteristics) and creating "world-class universities" that follow the metrics for which are very largely Western (Marginson, 2017; Zhu & Li, 2018). The disparity between the need of the government discourse and the reality of lacking such social, cultural, and political foundations should be responsible for the self-contradictory situations in the construction of cultural nationalism and the development of Chinese HE. In particular, truly cultural self-confidence has not been well-established, as it requires China to go beyond cultural arrogance or cultural cringe and treat both Chinese and Western cultures in an equal and open-minded way (Ong & Chan, 2012). So far, such a phenomenon reflects the transitional phase between an emerging China with global ambitions and a fully established China. Of course, we recognize that looking globally, this could be a political dilemma for any nation that wants to become the best country even without inputs from other cultures and at the same time, wants other countries to follow its lead.

Third, although it has been recognized as a tradition that the Chinese governments have been trying to retain the so-called Chinese core and absorb what is useful from the West in more than 100 years, the nuance across different periods should not be overlooked. Also, how this tradition has influenced Chinese HE, especially in the periods of Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping, is underexplored. This paper fills these gaps by offering a nuanced and updated picture. We do not mean to suggest that cultural nationalism is a fully established or fixed concept that can explain every aspect of Chinese HE, but aims to initiate a conversation

about its controversies and political usage. In particular, the paper gives rich data on how the latest government in the Xi Jinping era constructs and politicizes culture to serve its nationalist interests, and how this has impacted and could influence the direction of China's HE in the future. We view today's strong cultural nationalism in China as a result of the government's deep-rooted cultural pride and its long-standing quest of maintaining its political legitimacy. Consequently, current Chinese HE and most (if not all) Chinese HEIs are, to some extent, highly politicized and required to show loyalty to the government and follow its nationalistic path. We predict that the government will further strengthen its nationalistic approach to developing Chinese HE in the near future.

Given that the strong cultural nationalism has significantly affected many sectors in Chinese HEIs, its influence is likely to increase. The state exercises substantial control and influence over HEIs, including setting priorities, goals, and policies that shape the curriculum, research agendas, and academic appointments. For instance, the state's developmentalist approach may prioritize fields and disciplines that align with national strategic objectives, such as science, technology, and engineering. Another example is that on the one hand, to contribute to the state's economy (arguably, it has, to some extent, become capitalist economy), HEIs are encouraged to collaborate with industries, engage in applied research instead of simply creating pure knowledge, and promote entrepreneurship and innovation that requires critical thinking. On the other hand, the strong cultural nationalism may bring back Sinic tradition that emphasizes respect for authority and hierarchical relationships; prefers rote learning, memorization, and the mastery of classics, while downplaying critical thinking; and challenges the Western distinction between pure and applied knowledge. It is evident that the impacts of the selective and partial embrace of Sinic tradition within the strong cultural nationalism and its application in HE are multifaceted; thus, additional research is needed to delve deeper into these specific areas.

This paper is not without limitations and is in need of further extensions. Conceptually, we acknowledge that some terms (e.g., Marxism, communism, socialism, and Chinese model of HE) in this paper are vague (as the government intends to do so) and their meanings evolve over time, which we do not have enough space to fully elaborate on. There remains no clear and simple answer to what cultural self-confidence really means, what elements of Chinese culture should China inherit, or what exactly should China borrow from the West. In addition, this paper focuses only on the government's perspective; we are calling for research on the debates about cultural nationalism and its reflection in HE over time from the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as scholars, activists, educators, and the public. We also encourage various stakeholders (e.g., educators and

researchers) to critically take account of the government's nationalistic expectations of them (e.g., to revive the nation and its culture), to be aware of the way cultural nationalism affects their teaching and research (in terms of what and how to teach and study), and to rethink their response to the changes in Chinese HE. Future research could also examine the effects on stakeholders of today's strong cultural nationalism, especially in terms of academic freedom, international cooperation, and other issues.

Overall, this paper provides insights into the nationalist trends and tensions in the development of the Chinese HE system from a cultural nationalism perspective. We believe that cultural nationalism can be a useful lens that offers fresh perspectives on how culture and politics are interconnected in Chinese HE. This study offers a valuable theoretical foundation for further research on cultural nationalism and its influence on HE systems in other countries.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in relation to this study.

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