Research Article

Censorship and Digital Defiance in Higher Education: Exploring Barriers to Studying Degrees in China's Joint Venture International Universities

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Abstract

Student expression and access to knowledge within China's Higher Education (HE) system is explored in this article. It considers if censorship and authoritarianism drive academic digital piracy. Exploring the rise of joint venture universities in China, whose curriculums are often directed by western influence, literature and pedagogy, the article raises critical questions about the impact of censorship on student experience. To forge answers to these questions, it presents the views of Chinese postgraduate students engaged in learning at a UK joint venture university in China, who revealed they perceived piracy as necessary to promote academic progress and overcome censorship. The article concludes, therefore, by suggesting digital piracy has become part of the fabric of university learning and teaching, which is catalysed in settings where censorship creates intellectual resource scarcity, widening the gap. Hence, the study demonstrates disadvantage and inequalities faced by international students, such as those in China, who are engaged in curriculums designed by universities in the UK, which has different ideas surrounding freedom of academic expression.

Keywords: *Higher education; China; censorship, authoritarianism; academic freedom; digital piracy.*

1. Introduction

The pursuit of free expression and unrestricted access to knowledge within China's Higher Education (HE) system has been a contentious issue. There are complex concerns around delivering degree level education within western-led joint venture universities, particularly those that host and educate international students. This is because censorship and authoritarianism, with respect to the Internet and alongside subsequent limits to academic freedoms, is a feature of Chinese society, which may drive students towards digital piracy, or elaborate and locally criminalised circumvention methods, such as Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to navigate a national-level firewall (Day, 2024a; 2024b). This article delves into this dynamic, examining the motivations and experiences of Chinese students navigating the challenges of accessing educational resources, such as books and intellectual learning content online, in an international educational environment where digital information is highly regulated. Put another way, whether local regulation and restriction of learning material pushes students in an international HE setting to break laws related to the Internet, through social networks on the World Wide Web (the Web). This has been shown to be a prevalent problem in neighbouring Thailand and has led to student arrests (Day & Skulsuthavong, 2021a; 2021b).

Digital authoritarianism in China, however, is characterised by more sophisticated and far-reaching governance, alongside sophisticated use of technology to monitor, censor, and modify information, which often leads to restrictions over online freedom of expression and access to knowledge. In particular, knowledge promoting resistance to ideological thinking, limiting a pro-human Web and more open higher learning (Day et al., 2015). Across such environments, students may be compelled to break local Internet laws via VPNs and pirating content to circumvent censorship. They could do so to access educational materials or information otherwise blocked and unavailable. One consequence of authoritarianism is the widespread censorship of online content, including resources, academic journals, and materials crucial for learning and research. Universities may also face limited access to legitimate sources. So, some students may resort to using VPNs, which are illegal in China, to bypass Internet restrictions and access censored websites.

Digital authoritarianism often leads to the restriction, or outright banning, of certain online services, including streaming platforms, e-book libraries, and software repositories. Whilst piracy is illegal, the lack of legal alternatives, due to censorship and restrictions in mainland China, can drive those studying in international universities, forged by joint ventures with UK and US universities, to engage in this form of digital law-breaking out of necessity – to access learning material deemed undesirable, but implemented in curriculums by western scholars with little consideration as to the demands faced by the students who will study such texts. Consider, for example, a Chinese student studying English Literature at a western joint venture university in China, whose course reading might include George Orwell's *1984*, or even *Animal Farm*. Consequently, a research question was formed from this line of reflection, which was applied to a large data set made up of focus group feedback, sourced from an in-person research study at one such joint venture university, located in China. This question asked:

RQ1: How do Chinese students studying in an international university in China describe censorship and repression of literature as a factor influencing academic digital piracy?

2. Review of Literature

Censorship affects the learning experiences of Chinese students in HE; the effect of repression on learning content, reading material and websites not only affects Chinese students but also impacts academics and the overall professional environment. This becomes more complex due to the increase in joint venture university establishments in China led by western universities, which are directed by foreign educational leaders without much familiarity of Chinese learning and teaching inside a complex political setting, whereby open discussions on certain topics can lead to reprisal. This produces differences in research freedoms, or even abandonment of academic careers. For example, Amnesty International conducted in-depth interviews with Chinese international students who studied in western universities across 2018 to 2023, which showed many felt widespread fear of repercussions from Chinese authorities for exercising their rights to expression even abroad and away from the setting (Amnesty International, 2024a). Moreover, it was shown across this report that fear of reprisal at home, for actions overseas, could affect their academic, personal, family and social lives, leading to self-censorship in classroom discussions. Equally, unwillingness and avoidance of studying topics deemed as sensitive in course studies, alongside reluctance to pursue academic careers for fear of being unable to engage openly with discussion (Amnesty International, 2024b).

Amnesty (2024a) also identified that Chinese students will limit their participation in certain social events, online discussions, and campus events if there is a risk that they could be exposed to something that might be reported to mainland Chinese political organisations. Framed in this landscape, it becomes difficult to grasp how collaborative ventures situated in mainland China can reflect the same openness and basis in critical enquiry of western HE, thus creating equal and authentic learning experiences that satisfy UK HE quality assurance. This had led to considerable variance across western universities, faced with the challenge of educating students both within mainland China, online at a distance and through immersion programmes, in addition to those studying on campus as international students. Some UK universities have gone so far as to encourage students to write and submit papers anonymously to protect critical expression, whilst others have questioned the legality of encouraging students to use VPNs to bypass locally restrictive firewalls (Fire, 2024). Complexity also rests in the digital silk road, so the significant and rapid expansion of Chinese digitally mediated companies, focused on Internet technologies, which rapidly intersect with western companies and corporations. These are especially problematic, given that many such companies are co-owned by political bodies, actors and agents, meaning that such forces can leverage such companies as instruments of expansive political influence (Qiang, 2024).

In the immediate future, then, the influx of Chinese engineers, managers, and technical experts is likely to reinforce the inclination of developing nations, particularly those under authoritarian rule, towards China's model of a tightly controlled Internet ecosystem, such as seen in Myanmar during the civil war that is still ongoing presently (Phyo et al., 2023). Digital authoritarianism has been shown to affect student's learning journey within universities, and the impact of repression within learning impacts the way curriculums take shape, and this process influences multiple countries across Asia, given the close working relationships of several countries in the region that emulate similar political systems of governance (Day & Skulsuthavong, 2021; 2022). Within Thailand, for example, it has been observed that students studying overseas from China, and other international settings, felt that they carried a degree of censorship both within their learning, and beyond it into their overall lifelong educational experiences – especially because some of the structures and systems that supported such repression of critical enquiry were built into their educational habitus (Day et al., 2022; Day et al., 2021). Consequently, the spread of digital authoritarianism in Asia has significant implications for the future of education and critical thinking, especially for those joint venture universities that partner through western leadership and direction. As more countries adopt such joint venture educational models, shaping of curriculum and educational experience inevitably will clash against systems of surveillance and control that exist in countries not governed by democratic systems of politics. These are long established, culturally entrenched systems of thought that

shape micro interactions, languages and behaviours that cannot be easily set aside through business partnerships (Low et al., 2020; 2022).

Hence, the potential for a broader, region-wide repression of intellectual freedom and creativity grows in relation to the degree of centralisation of higher education by political forces. This is particularly concerning given the significant role that education plays in shaping the minds and perspectives of future leaders and citizens, which is often found as a guiding tenet within western systems of learning in universities, so notably then those in favour of neo-liberal values. The ability of authoritarian governments to shape the educational narrative has been shown to have far-reaching consequences against fostering democratic values and the promotion of human rights (Qiang, 2023). It is therefore a paradox for western universities to undertake joint ventures in the east, given the global expansion of Chinese digital authoritarianism, which poses a challenge to teaching democratic values and critical thinking about individual freedoms in the classroom. As China relies upon a clearly defined model of digital surveillance, it limits the ability of citizens to engage in free and open discourse, and access content, knowledge and learning from overseas. The use of advanced technologies such as facial recognition, artificial intelligence, and big data analytics to monitor and control decision-making and thought is a particularly focal part of digital authoritarianism, as it enables unprecedented levels of control over students' lives and learning styles (Weiss, 2019; Fire, 2024).

Consequently, the spread of digital authoritarianism in China has significant implications for the future of education and critical thinking, especially as more universities form joint ventures within the country. Soft power influence means that some might even shift in their views of surveillance and control, making professional compromises to satisfy the potential for a broader, region-wide stifling of intellectual freedom and creativity, hence shaping control over the educational narrative, which itself can have far-reaching consequences for the development of democratic values and the promotion of human rights (Qiang, 2023). The complexities around joint ventures and the subsequent pedagogical implications, on both students and staff, present complex challenges for educational institutions to solve. Joint venture universities must navigate different cultural norms, between staff, who are often young, earlier career and sourced locally, and international students who, may make up a small or large majority of those engaged within a particular campus. Those students who attend a university run and regulated by a western country might benefit from grander international exposure, which can improve graduate destinations, but institutions face a range of complexities and challenges in navigating cultural differences, pedagogical approaches, and political realities. These issues require careful consideration by both Chinese and foreign partners to ensure the success and sustainability of these programs, less either side begin to lose influence over the partnership.

One key area of concern is the cultural divide between China and the partner country. Educational systems within Asia are traditionally rooted in Rote pedagogy and hierarchical thinking, with considerable deference placed on must bridge different norms and expectations, which can lead to misunderstandings and tensions. Chinese students at these institutions may struggle to adapt to the more open, discussion-based teaching style common in the foreign partner's education system, compared to the lecture-based approach they are accustomed to in China. Foreign faculty within such partnerships also often lack familiarity with the Chinese research environment, local connections and underpinning social relationships that drive decision-making in securing local funding and collaborations (Cao, 2013). Pedagogical challenges also arise from the need to balance adopting the foreign partner's curriculum, and western teaching methods, while also incorporating and meeting Chinese educational requirements. This can result in an approach that may not fully satisfy either side or leads to one side feeling the dominance of the other. There are also ideological concerns within China about the potential spread of dissenting political views through foreign academic influences at university, and so the inclusion of western universities within the country draws significant political oversight with respect to what can be taught and expressed on campuses, meaning that the degree that students experience authentic western curriculums is debatable. The delivery of joint programs, and the future approval of new institutions that provide western curricular, especially in humanities or social sciences, remains delicate due to these sensitivities, and the extent that such curricular can be politically insensitive (Redden, 2021).

Political challenges further complicate the landscape for global educational partnerships. Within the last decade, there has been escalating geopolitical tensions between China and the West, which impact the stability and sustainability of joint ventures. including the dismissal of liberal scholars and restrictions on Western textbooks, creates an increasingly challenging environment to recruit international students and staff into (Redden, 2013). The Chinese government identifies value in joint ventures because they enhance university quality through foreign expertise, international grant capture, research and supporting local economic objectives by retaining students in the country, rather than external to it. However, navigating the complex cultural, pedagogical, and political landscape creates ongoing effort and adaptation by both Chinese and foreign partners to ensure the continued success of these joint ventures. The Chinese government has increased its focus on ideological control in universities, and it is a common requirement in universities regulated by authoritarian governments to ensure ideologically driven, national conditioning civic education courses for Chinese students in joint and internationally exposed universities (Yi, 2023). This leads to a complex dichotomy of cross-cultural

leadership in educational institutions, and power play over these courses to shape them more on Chinese history, culture and entrepreneurship, yet they still operate within China's political constraints.

Meanwhile, academic publishers and publishing of research has also faced challenges through efforts to censor content related to China, regarding learning materials, such as textbooks and academic journals available in the country. This is problematic, given that joint ventures have become a popular model for international education collaborations within China, likely because they are lucrative sources of income for western universities, who gain dividend benefits from the business model. As of 2021, there were approximately 2,356 approved joint venture education programs and institutions operating across the country, with ten having legal status as identified institutions, usually through partnership with Chinese universities. These joint ventures offer a range of undergraduate and graduate programs, with the ratio of Chinese to international students is typically dominated by domestic students, creating an interesting status quo whereby the extent of internationalisation in various programmes and campuses is debatable (Yi, 2023).

Prioritising certain research agendas provides complex challenges also for joint venture universities, especially around the development of China's 'knowledge economy' that emphasises a cultural pressure towards state approved research objectives, whereby any such research agendas that connect to transnational movements not seen as desirable would likely come are under threat of scrutiny and repression. Those most at risk in China are those that focus on labour conditions and class, suggested as equal uniformly across China, gender and feminism, traditionally not desirable due to patriarchal values established in society, race and ethnicity, and human rights. These areas of study are often rooted in sociological nuances around power and disruption; hence, their scrutiny has led to a narrowing of the scope of freedom landscape, and support of disciplinary areas that align more closely with the state's priorities and interests (Woodman & Pringle, 2022). This seeks to create a sociocultural practice around adherence to tradition, of neo-modern values that are reshaped by new technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and social media, which changes the way young people, and students in particular, communicate with one another, and with technologies themselves, emancipating their thinking from more traditionally organised systems of thought (Low et al., 2022).

A core challenge, then, within international universities located in Asia is the difficulty in navigating local political influences that seek to culturally melt globalised learning experiences into something aligned to more regional practice (Waters and Day, 2022a). This is especially problematic, because by bringing together diverse students into a joint venture setting, a campus is created that is a cultural mosaic, which is reflected in different eating practices, socialisation habits, communication languages spoken whilst on campus and even mechanisms of engagement with educators in the classroom (Waters & Day, 2022b). Mechanisms implemented that use HE institutes as methods of social conditioning in Asia have, in recent years, struggled to gain ground. Students, digitally connected and emancipated through use of VPNs and globalised social media, have begun to demonstrate resistance to traditional cultural and political values implemented in the classroom (Day &Skulsuthavong, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c). This creates tension in the learning habitus, often driving students closer together into their personal social networks, rather than towards collectivist values or ideologies (Day et al., 2022). Equally, repression and censorship of learning materials, books and other digital content has shown to be ineffective at preventing access by students, often encouraging them towards Internet piracy and law breaking, necessary to gain access to essential learning materials (Day, 2024a; 2024b).

Internet laws are regionally specific (Day et al., 2015) and as such, vary considerably; use of VPNS within China is prohibited, but often necessary within joint venture universities for students to gain access to content needed to pass the requirements of their courses. The only alternative, then, is digital piracy, another prohibited act in China, and found in Chinese HE to be driven by a complex interplay of factors, including repression in the classroom and limited access to resources (Day, 2024a). The restrictive academic environment in China, which entails censorship and surveillance, creates significant barriers for students seeking diverse and uncensored information, often necessary for completing western degrees rooted in critical thinking and debate. As a result, students may turn to digital piracy to access banned or restricted materials that are essential for their academic pursuits. Meanwhile, the limited availability of legitimate resources, coupled with socioeconomic constraints, further pushes students towards digital piracy. Many students view piracy as a tool to expedite their academic practice, weighing the potential criminal implications against the need for access to information, or simply not believing that any real consequences will be felt (Day, 2024a).

China is a complex political and educational setting, with layers of censorship operating across every form of social expression, especially on the Internet (Tai & Fu, 2020). Indeed, considerable economic effort is placed on Internet censorship within China, limiting various aspects of creative expression (Fan & Guan, 2023). Despite commonplace use of VPNs to avoid censorship, many Chinese citizens are concerned about using such technologies, and their motivations for bypassing Internet censorship often seek to do so to gain access to information restricted within the country (Yang & Liu, 2014). Indeed, such censorship is driven by strategic policy and resourcing at a scale unlike experienced in western countries (Lorentzen, 2014). As King et al. (2013) point out, however, the approaches undertaken by the government are complex, with respect to repression and censorship; in their study, the authors indicated that content with negative, even

vitriolic, criticism of the state, its leaders, and its policies are not more likely to be censored than anything else. Rather, the efforts of the government are curtailing collective action by limiting comments, resources and communal spaces that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobility against the government, regardless of content. Censorship, therefore, is likely oriented naturally towards universities and their teaching content, as an attempt to forestall collective activities that might seek to displace power and present protest to the government, be it now or in the future (King et al., 2013).

This is clear in cases where institutional channels fail to provide necessary learning materials due to censorship, limited terms of operation, such as seen in joint ventures that must adhere to strict rules in order to run universities in the country, or simply the high costs of foreign textbooks, which are often translated unofficially within the country, a practice itself that operates in and around grey literature dissemination – so, the sharing of resources that may, or may not, represent in full the original textbook, or be authorised as such. Within the Internet, domains such as Lib.Gen, Z-library and informal social networks that disseminate textbooks and other forms of literature are very popular, because they exploit the lack of digital rights management applied to many copies of electronic books (eBooks). Whilst recent closure of such online platforms that enabled digital book piracy has limited this practice more, debates have dominated discussion around the ethics of stealing digital literature in recent years. This has highlighted the reliance of students on such resources and platforms, often linked to economic factors, with less consideration about whether they are forced to access academic materials through illegitimate means (Day, 2024b). Questions remain, however, as to whether censorship and struggle for free expression within joint venture higher educational institutes push students towards digital law-breaking, simply because they have no other choice. Whilst the benefits of new technologies, such as AI, to help improve teaching, learning and cultural preservation are increasingly discussed, access to such technologies also creates digital divides amongst students, especially considering that (Low et al., 2022; Day, 2024b).

3. Materials and Methods

This study examined student perspectives on the extent to which censorship and repression of learning influenced activity with respect to digital piracy in higher education at a joint British-Chinese university in mainland China. Using a qualitative approach, data was collected through an online survey and digital focus group triggered after students attended in-person seminars that discussed the topic of digital piracy. Of the 103 seminar attendees, 91 completed the survey (88% response rate), and 87 participated in online forum discussions (84% engagement rate). Participants were predominantly female (91%), aged 22-25 (70%), and all identified as Chinese nationals. Because of this, there was extra considerations given to collecting data in the virtual learning environment (VLE). The research employed a grounded theory approach, whereby narrative commonality and thematic comparison drove analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The study adhered to ethical guidelines, including IRB approval as part of a broader action research study, which assessed the essential participatory steps, voluntary participation, informed consent, and data confidentiality for interviewing students. This included key questions, content and data protection steps to reduce potential for identification on this delicate issue in China.

4. Discussion

Initially, discussion across those engaged in the study highlighted collectively the complex issue of knowledge accessibility and the tensions between free access to information and various limiting factors caused by political interference. Student A acknowledges that despite advancements in information availability, and a more generally open attitude found within their university, there were still barriers such as censorship, political restrictions, and the need for specialised educational support in their institution, to enable access to learning in certain sensitive fields, or simply to make sense of learning content. For example, Student A remarked:

> That being said, there are still some limitations to the availability of knowledge. In some countries or regions, censorship or political restrictions may limit access to certain information or ideas. Additionally, there may be certain fields of knowledge that are more difficult to access or understand without a certain level of education or training. In conclusion, the statement "knowledge should be freely available to everyone, everywhere" is a complex one that requires critical thinking to fully analyze. While there are many benefits to increasing access to knowledge, there may also be some limitations and challenges to consider. Ultimately, the goal should be to strike a balance between ensuring access to knowledge while also supporting the incentives and rewards necessary for continued innovation and creativity. So, I think it should be free to everyone.

Uniquely, there is a considerable emphasis across those interviewed positioning students as recognising the benefits of widespread, uncensored access to knowledge, made possible through the Internet, while also pointing out the need to balance this with incentives for innovation. Interestingly, unlike as would be expected for student's studying in an authoritative setting, which generally lends itself to promoting adherence amongst learners to follow rules and regulations, Student B openly suggested that they used digital piracy to save money in entertainment content but implied this led them to think more about using digital piracy to avoid censorship and gain free access to knowledge for everyone. They remarked "l personally also downloads some pirated movies online to save money. Besides, such platform is also a way to avoid censorship." I personally hope such free platform can live forever, but it seems

impossible." For Student C, the access to digital piracy websites that distributed grey literature had become an essential feature of their learning, but what was interesting is so too had access to VPNs. As the student remarked, online digital piracy made their "…research more convenient, we don't have to log in, open the VPN can look up helpful resources for their own research."

Indeed, this view echoed across responses, with Student D specifically indicating that the repressive Internet censorship they faced encouraged them towards using VPNs, which are illegal within China, and digital piracy, which is illegal in most countries. They remarked "China has network control, and a VPN is required to use external websites, which affects study and life. "Collectively, those who contributed insights stressed the critical need for making knowledge accessible online to succeed in their academic study. Digital piracy, then, was deemed the most convenient method, a technological form of emancipation from surveillance and censorship, facilitated through technologies that shaped and enabled masking of activity online. Student E pointed out that access to knowledge aligned to UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and positioned an interesting narrative that outlined how western universities are supposed to be aligned to fulfilling such objectives, yet partner in joint ventures whereby there is no guarantee such values can be upheld. As several students felt, learning in university was supposed to provide equal education opportunities, particularly for those engaged in western curricular and learning styles. However, barriers hindered this goal, including political conflicts, censorship, and limited resources to western learning materials, such as textbooks, in educational institutions. These obstacles prevented knowledge from being freely accessible to everyone, creating a disparity in educational opportunities for learners in their degrees. As Student E remarked:

I do hope that knowledge can be accessible online, which probably is the most convenient way under the technological context nowadays. As the SDG goal is aiming to have equal education, especially for all children, it is a starting point to provide all children with equal access to knowledge. However, often due to political reasons, such as conflicts, or supervisions… knowledge is under control to not be open for everyone and everywhere. It is a little bit desperate to see this situation happening in each country. More broadly, it can relate to any form of knowledge, not only online educational knowledge. For example, there are high-quality movies but closed to show probably in each country due to present politics' concerns. That is, to freely have available knowledge for everyone and everywhere is mostly a wishful dream from my reasoning.

Indeed, it was clearly indicated across those who participated in the study that the extent of library resources, and restricted access to journal papers, even with institutional accounts established by joint university partners under special agreements, forced students to seek alternative sources online, especially if the materials they wanted to study were deemed as sensitive within the wider political setting. This situation underscores the need for universities establishing joint ventures to re-consider both the curricular and accessibility issues faced in the digital divide encountered by students, who are not like those studying at home in western nations whereby free access to knowledge to enhance educational journeys is commonplace. As Student F remarked "I can come into contact with some English books while studying at the Chinese-foreign cooperative university, the resources of the library are limited. In addition, many journal papers have no right to download even if they log in through the school account. Therefore, I can only find resources online by myself."

One issue was not just accessibility, but deeper philosophy beliefs amongst students that they should be able to learn whatever they wanted. As Student G remarked "…knowledge should be free to everyone which could enhance education in the world." However, not every student saw it this way, aligning more positively with efforts both within China, and their university, to provide access to knowledge needed. As Student H remarked "…there is a wealth of information available through libraries, the internet, and educational institutions. While there may be barriers to accessing knowledge such as cost or language, many efforts have been made to increase access to information through initiatives like open access publishing and online educational resources." Yet, Student I challenged this position, remarking "In China, it is difficult to buy printed English books. Even if resources are found, they are too expensive for ordinary people due to the exchange rate and taxes." One student seemed to indicate that they felt repression of knowledge impacted scholarship in learning, but also reduced the cultural advancement of the country, creating a sense of stagnation that limited innovation. Student J remarked "If a student's access to knowledge is restricted because he has no money, he will not be able to use knowledge to change his fate, and will remain poor, forming a vicious circle, and it will be difficult to improve the average cultural level of our society." A similar point was raised by Student K, who went so far to suggest that the decision to repress knowledge directly and negatively impacted the ability of young Chinese citizens to positively shape future social change. They argued:

Throughout human history, from primitive society to modern society, the accumulation and precipitation of human knowledge has developed from slow to fast. Knowledge is the basis for the development of all human activities, and without the precipitation and accumulation of knowledge, the development of society will become slow, and even the development of certain aspects will be broken or stagnant. Therefore, knowledge is very important to promote the development of society, and each person makes history in the long history. It is very important to have free access to

knowledge for every person. Therefore, I think that whenever and wherever people can freely access the knowledge they need, according to their needs, so that people will be more likely to generate more innovation based on their original knowledge and continue to drive the development of society. I agree on it. As for me, a working person in a big city in China, I can't afford every useful information on the Internet for what I want, not to mention someone isn't able to make a living (especially for students), even though we live in the age of information explosion.

The student, then, argues that lack of ability to learn freely any knowledge they see as useful, through unrestricted access to books and other study materials, whether online or in hard copy, limits their progress and ability to contribute to societal development. Positioned in their reasoning is the argument that throughout China's history, the accumulation and sharing of knowledge has become stagnated, due to rules and regulations that limit the basis for knowledge exchange activities. The student, then, like others interviewed in this sample, believed that free access to knowledge is crucial for everyone, as it allows people to be more creative. However, they point out a challenge that extended to many within the mainland: as a student, with limited license access and website restriction, they struggled to access the materials they needed. This observation highlights the gap between the abundance of information in the information age of the Internet, and the practical limitations that prevent many from fully accessing this knowledge, stressing that there is a digital divide widening in international universities established overseas, where expectations are placed on students to learn in western styles, using materials more readily available in the west. As Student L reinforces "In my current setting, I can't always get the academic books I want due to local rules or regulations." Meanwhile, Student M remarked an aligned point, noting:

As a student of an international joint venture university, I have access to more international journals through the university's electronic library than students in public universities. But in my actual use, I will still encounter certain limitations. For example, sometimes I found difficult to find journal contents through websites displayed in online library. Another problem is that for some web sites… (the) university does not have access.

These students, then, offer insights that shed light on challenges faced by students studying in internationally situated universities. In particular, how western curricular and study methods may directly challenge the widespread information access restrictions in China, affecting both academic institutions and the general learning experience. Due to political reasons, the government imposes limitations on accessing foreign news, videos, books, and websites, which make learning especially problematic if students are engaged in learning experiences in the social sciences and humanities. This creates significant challenges for individuals enthusiastic about learning foreign cultures, arts and histories, and for students who require international resources for their studies, for example during graduate study that requires a deeper, more critically robust exploration of thinking. The restrictions, of course, extend beyond universities, and the students in the sample seemed concerned about the impact of the future social growth. As Student N remarked "Actually, not only in the university, in the entire country, due to some political reasons and stands, there is always an strict restriction for people to have access to foreign news, videos or books...It becomes an distress for people who have passion for leaning foreign culture."

Captured across the insights from the students in the sample was a clear indicator that repression of learning in their university experiences created an emotional and practical toll. Students, it seemed, expressed distress and frustration as they struggled to access necessary materials for their degree learning experiences, and any subsequent innovation towards a culture of lifelong learning that might be catalysed by studying in universities. This situation forced students, it seemed, to seek alternative methods to obtain information, such as using platforms that offered pirated texts and promoted digital law breaking, such as through VPNs to circumvent local censorship protocols. The responses highlight the tension between government control and these students' desire for unrestricted learning and access to global knowledge. This is a delicate issue, one illustrating the complex landscape of information access in China's increasingly globalised academic environment, which seemed to have been established with less cultural and political understanding that would be optimal to empower student success. As Student O summarises, "In my course, I need to learn more about foreign resources and books. However, because of domestic laws and regulations, we do not have access to foreign websites. So, a lot of the time I struggle with these things."

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The tension between globally expansive, western located universities setting up businesses in China, usually as joint ventures with local universities or political bodies, without really understanding fully the dynamics and complexities of the country is problematic. This study has highlighted the significant challenges they face in navigating the complex political and cultural landscape of the country when designing learning curriculums and degree experiences. While the allure of tapping into China's vast student population and educational market is understandable, as it offers high profits and builds upon the neoliberal culture permeating within HE presently, the realities of operating within a heavily censored and controlled environment can have profound impacts on the learning experiences of students, especially in terms of trying to create equitable learning experiences to their counterparts located in parent universities in the west. One of the primary issues is the clash between the principles of academic freedom and the stringent restrictions on

speech, literature, knowledge, and expression imposed by various governments that do not operate based on western democratic ideals. Western universities are accustomed to open discourse and the free exchange of ideas, protected by freedom of expression, which often will inevitably clash with the censorship and ideological control exercised by the authorities. This can lead to a dilution of the educational experience, as certain topics and perspectives become off-limits, limiting the depth and breadth of the curriculum, creating a questionably authentic learning experience, especially if the degrees issued in China are awarded by western universities, and so are supposed to have comparable experiences to the UK.

Moreover, the cultural differences between Western and Chinese educational systems can create additional hurdles. The emphasis on rote learning, and exam-oriented education in China, may clash with the more interactive, critical-thinking-based approaches driven by many western universities. Asking students to prepare for systems of assessment in a distinct cultural and intellectual tradition or aligning requirements for resources freely available in the west, but problematically limited in China, can mismatch learning experiences, and lead to frustration, as well as disengagement, among students. As seen in the discussion across the sample, students may struggle to adapt to the unfamiliar teaching methods and expectations. The tension between global universities and the Chinese political and cultural landscape highlights the need for a nuanced and well-informed approach to establishing successful educational partnerships in the country. At the core of this, we need to prioritise quality learning experiences and the preservation of academic integrity. As shown in this study, the censorship of the Internet in China has an impact on the study experiences of Chinese students enrolled in international degree programs designed by Western educators. The students in the sample indicated that their degrees often rely on free access to information and particular western textbooks, which promote the free exchange of ideas, however, in their experience, this was fundamentally at odds with the restrictive environment imposed by China's Internet censorship.

One of the primary challenges, indicated in the sample by students, is the limited access to online resources and information, needed to support their degree learning experiences. Many websites, databases, and platforms that are essential for academic research and learning are blocked, or heavily censored in China. This was shown, across those studied, to be impactful of students' learning experience, and made it difficult for them to engage with the full breadth of their studies, limiting the authenticity of the degrees undertaken. This can lead to a skewed understanding of topics, alongside increased bias, as students are forced to rely on the limited information available within the confines of the censored Internet. Consequently, the effect of censorship on open discourse has impacted the classroom experience of students' studying in international universities. Students might feel hesitant to voice their opinions or engage in critical discussions, fearing potential repercussions from authorities and this sense of self-censorship can stifle the very essence of western degree education, where the free exchange of ideas and the ability to challenge assumptions are embedded at the core of interaction.

Consequently, western universities' neoliberal efforts to capitalise expansion overseas, alongside being unfamiliar with the nuances of China's censorship, creates a potential recipe for disaster. At the very least, there is a struggle to create an equitable environment that fosters the kind of intellectual exploration and debate, which is expected in international degree programs. Educational leaders need to critically consider how best to navigate this diplomatically, recognising the cultural differences and political requirements that exist in China, without expecting to circumvent them. This includes collaborating more closely with Chinese partner universities to better navigate the complex setting joint ventures unfold within, tailoring more carefully academic courses, required learning materials and weighing more deeply the student success journey, by considering digital divides.

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