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Teaching Media Studies at a Liberal Arts College in China: A Pedagogical Reflection on Social Diversity, Difference and Critical Thinking

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Abstract

This article examines the pedagogical challenges and opportunities involved in teaching Media Studies in Chinese Mainland's private liberal arts colleges, where demographics indicate that students are predominantly Han Chinese from upper-middle-class backgrounds, with limited exposure to social diversity. Employing a mixed-methods approach—quantitative analysis on enrollment data analysis, qualitative classroom observations and case studies of pedagogical initiatives, this article investigates the structural homogeneity of the student body and its implications for critical thinking. Findings reveal that while students initially focused on specific diversity topics (e.g., gender), structured pedagogical interventions broadened their critical awareness to include disability, religion, migration and cross-cultural representations. By emphasizing social-inclusion pedagogies centered on "social difference" rather than static "diversity," this research demonstrates how educators can counter neoliberal marketization in higher education and foster critical engagement with plural communities. The study contributes to global debates on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) by advocating for curricula that bridge privilege and social realities, thus preparing students to navigate and address inequality in a divided world.

Keywords: neoliberalism, higher education, social inclusion, media pedagogy, critical thinking

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As the researchers point out, income inequality and racial inequality go hand in hand, and affluent children are often educated without a great deal of interaction with members of other socioeconomic and racial groups. Private schools, even while they try to dispense financial aid to attract a more diverse student body, are still the domain of the wealthy – and the white.

> –Blythe Grossberg, *I Left My Homework in the Hamptons: What I Learned Teaching the Children of the One Percent* (2021, p. 41)

The schooling process trains (Chinese) elite youth to compete for global status. During high school, elite adolescents must cultivate class-based cultural taste, develop the ability to skillfully utilize knowledge, exhibit a relaxed attitude when interacting with superiors and inferiors, and dissociate from markers of nonelite status. After entering college, these elite youth continue to refine the marks of elitism and form networks with similarly elite alumni.

> – Y. L. Chiang, *Study Gods: How the new Chinese elite prepare for global competition* (2022, p. 7)

The above quotations challenge the pedagogical practices of instructors who teach in institutions that draw from a pool of students that is characterized by demographic homogeneity in terms of socioeconomic class and race/ethnicity. Scholars have extensively critiqued the effects of neoliberalism in education, particularly its reinforcement of hierarchical structures (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2000; Davies and Bansel, 2007) and "pedagogy of the privileged" (Cresswell et al., 2013; Grossberg, 2021; Chiang, 2022) as well as the teaching approaches about "the other" that affect othering within and beyond the classroom (Gordon, 2010; Chakravarty, 2019). On the one hand, we can see the pervasiveness of the student-as-customer ethos in the educational environment, which mirrors a broader, global trend identified by Slaughter and Rhoades (2000) where neoliberalism has led to the centralization of market values in educational institutions. The colleges and universities may outwardly seem non-discriminatory; however, the affordability of higher education is homogenizing the student body on campus (Mintz, 2021). On the other hand, many educators are engaging critically with neoliberal social realities in ways that prepare privileged students for their roles as future citizens who understand and respond actively to social inequality. This article draws on the author's experience of teaching Media Studies at one of the pioneering private international cooperative liberal

arts colleges (joint-venture institutions) in Chinese Mainland and outlines a pedagogy that prompts privileged students to engage directly with multilayered social differences, connect with different people and ideas, and realize the value of such engagement in developing a more equitable, commonly livable world. The study employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze structural homogeneity and pedagogical responses to social diversity and differences issues in a specific Chinese liberal arts context and extrapolate some of the findings to Chinese liberal arts colleges at large. Quantitative data on student demographics (ethnicity/race, tuition fees, regional distribution) were compiled from institutional reports and China's Seventh National Population Census. Qualitative insights derive from the author's classroom observations and pedagogical interventions.

Structural Homogeneity

The market-oriented international cooperative liberal arts colleges established in the Chinese Mainland after the turn of the millennium drew their students from a largely homogenous pool. As shown in Figure 1, over 95% of students in these institutions are ethnically Han, with tuition fees 20-40 times higher than public universities, effectively limiting enrollment to affluent families. Such demographic realities "without enough critical mass of minority students" can "restrict the depth of dialogue and obscure the 'on-the-ground realities' and challenges facing minority peers and co-workers" (Nishimura et al., 2019, p. 117). Recognising the challenges of structural homogeneity of the student body, liberal arts colleges in the US are prioritizing the diversity of the student body in terms of racial and ethnic diversity, socioeconomic diversity, gender balance, and regional diversity across a wide variety of academic disciplines . Their new counterparts in Chinese Mainland also work hard to accommodate more diverse student demographics.

In 2003, the State Council implemented the *Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools.* This legislation fostered the development of elitist joint-venture Higher Education Institutions (the latest HEI trend in Chinese Mainland) characterized by their internationalization profiles, high tuition fees and selective students who achieved at least the second-highest scores in China's national college entrance exam. Among the eleven cooperative HEIs, six such institutions explicitly promote their education as 'liberal arts' in nature . The tuition fees of these private colleges could

be 20 to 40 times higher than those at public universities that offer liberal arts education in China (Author's calculation, see Figure 1). This situation restricts enrollment to students from specific income groups.

Liberal Arts HEIs(^private; *public),Year	**Total Undergraduates Enrolled**	**Ethnic Han/Minority Composition – Domestic Students**	**International Students in percentage**	**Tuition Fees/ Undergraduate 2025 CNY**
^ NYU Shanghai, 2024	515	Generic data says students are from 7 ethnic groups including Han and 21 provinces	Nearly 50% from 41 foreign countries	200,000-230,000
^ Duke Kunshan University, 2024	504	Generic data says 354 students from 25 provinces (featuring 3 students from minority groups)	25.78% (150 persons), from 33 foreign countries	190,000
^ The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen, 2024	1,836	96.55% Han; 3.45% from 10 minority groups; overall from 28 provinces	14.7% (270 persons), from 18 countries	140,000
^ University of Nottingham Ningbo China, 2022	2,103	95.2% Han; 4.8% from 24 minority groups; overall from 28 provinces	Generic data says students are from 19 foreign countries	100,000
^ Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University, 2020	4,201	95% Han; 5% from 25 minority groups; overall from 31 provinces	No accessible data for 2020; recruited 400 including graduates in 2023	93,000
^ Beijing Normal -Hong Kong Baptist University (formerly UIC), 2022	Estimated as 2,050 (2,000+ in 2022 & 2,100+ in 2023)	94.5% Han; 5.5% (113 persons) from 24 minority groups; overall from 28 provinces	Only published qualitative stories of some foreign students	100,000-120,000
*** Peking University, 2023**	4,483	90% Han; 10% from 29 minority groups; overall from 31 provinces	9.35% (419 persons), from 49 foreign countries	5,000-5,300 for Yuanpei students

*** East China Normal University, 2024 (including graduates)**	12,506	92.31% Han; 7.69% from 39 minority groups; overall from 31 provinces	10.16% (1270 persons), from 95 foreign countries	6,500-7,700
Undergraduates in Chinese Mainland, 2020	18,257,460	90.31% Han; 9.69% from 55 minority groups		
Population in Chinese Mainland, 2020	1,443,497,378 (national population), 91.11% Han (Han population increased by 4.93% from that in 2010); 8.89% from 55 ethnic minority groups (minority population had a 10.26% growth compared to that in 2010)			

Figure 1 *Student enrollment profiles for undergraduates showing ethnic composition and tuition fees.*

Note. Data on student enrollment profiles were compiled from institutional websites and official social media accounts. Undergraduate enrollment data for Chinese Mainland (2020) were obtained from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2021): https://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_560/2020/quanguo/202108/t20210831_556358.html Population data for Chinese Mainland (2020) were sourced from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2021): https://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202105/t20210510_1817185.html

As for the ethno-racial diversity in student demographics for the six private liberal arts colleges in Chinese Mainland, see Figure 1, Beijing Normal-Hong Kong Baptist University (BNBU; formerly UIC) has the highest level of domestic ethnic diversity—approximately 5.5% of the total students enrolled in 2022 were from 24 ethnic minority groups—but potentially the lowest international diversity performance, while NYU Shanghai is at the opposite pole regarding the two indexes. In 2024, NYU Shanghai claimed it achieved a 1:1 domestic and international student population; however, among the joint-venture liberal arts colleges in China, its figures indicate that it has the least diverse intake from across the seven ethnic groups (including Han).

There are three possible reasons for the generally low level of domestic ethnic diversity of student body in these six cooperative HEIs. First, given the high tuition fees, regional disparities and parents' education investment preferences across the 31 provinces of Chinese Mainland, it

is not surprising to see the major student body come from 18 provinces located in the more prosperous, Han-dominated and Confucianism-influenced China Proper (i.e., traditional Han Chinese regions). According to Chen et al., (2021), middle-income, urban and single-child families in provinces that are highly influenced by Confucianism have a disproportionate educational involvement in China, which explains the significant regional and cultural concentration of the student body in private schools. Second, due to the complex integration of the specialized ethnic education and higher education system in China, "60% of students from ethnic minority groups are attending the special HEIs–minzu universities (literally 'ethnic universities') and the non-ethnic-focused HEIs that are located in the ethnic minority autonomous regions" (Chen and Zhang, 2020); the remaining 40% then attend either the public or private non-ethnic-focused HEIs in Chinese Mainland, thus leaving only a small part to enroll in the newly established joint-venture colleges. Third, these joint-venture liberal arts colleges strategically select prospective students by emphasizing academic excellence and the potential edge given by global competition. According to the admission data in institutional reports published on their websites, these joint-venture HEIs recruited students who achieved first-or-second-rank points in China's national college entrance exam, which are much higher scores than the policy-aligned lower batch points achieved by students from ethnic minority backgrounds especially in Tibet, South Xinjiang, Qinghai and Ningxia. Among the six joint-venture liberal arts colleges (see Figure 1), five institutes have failed to recruit students from Tibet, Qinghai and Ningxia; only Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University, like its public counterparts, has been recruiting students from all 31 provinces in Chinese Mainland since 2013 . The institute also has enrolled the largest student population among the private liberal arts colleges in China—more than 4,000 undergraduates, including more than 200 ethnic minority students enroll per year, which contrasts with the traditional 'smallness' of liberal arts colleges in the US. The diversity efforts of Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University reflect the trend of building larger liberal arts colleges in China.

Figure 1 also reveals that tuition fees are much higher in the joint-venture HEIs that have better international diversity performance in China. On the one hand, this phenomenon echoes the overwhelming practices of marketing diversity of HEIs amidst the global rise of neoliberalism (Berrey, 2011; Urciuoli, 2022), which

further promotes "diversity efforts as an accepted norm at least on the (college) policy sphere" (Nishimura et al., 2019, p. 118). On the other hand, as Mok (2021) points out, the market success of these elitist joint-venture colleges is part of China's state-led project to create an "internal" education market for diversifying learning experiences of domestic citizens and, meanwhile, compete for China's global status with internationalization profiles by expanding the "external market", thus "riding over neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics." The student body in universities for the state agencies, as argued by Liu, Zhao and Starkey (2023), "is of strategic significance because of its size and growing impact upon society." For the demographic diversity of the student body in joint-venture HEIs, the PRC Ministry of Education and the legislation are encouraging them to recruit more foreign students. For instance, Article 23 of the *Interim Provisions on Overseas Higher Education Institutions Running Schools in the Hainan Free Trade Port* (2023). State regulations together with the divergent student admission policies have further resulted in the student body of the private liberal arts colleges consisting largely of the Han Chinese upper middle-class group.

Though there is evidence of an increase in both domestic ethnic diversity and international diversity, stemming either from an instrumental rationale that highlights the education benefits of a better understanding of 'diversity' or from a moral rationale that advocates the value of racial/ethnic equality, the continuing lack of structural diversity of the student body in terms of social class and ethnicity/race is obvious at these joint-venture HEIs. If we accept that "demographic diversity alone is not excellence, but excellence is enhanced and enriched by diversity" (Ghosh, 2012), the challenge for the joint-venture liberal arts colleges in China, then, is to ensure that students draw experiences from the narrow socio-economic and ethnic stratum that they inhabit, so as to expose them to enough diversity to enrich their worldview.

Student Diversity Performance

The experience of student diversity is claimed to have three dimensions–structural/demographic diversity, classroom diversity, and interactional diversity (Nishimura et al., 2019, p. 109). When a limited structural diversity of the student body is available on campus, classroom diversity and interactional diversity that are more concerned with pedagogical and social experiences of diversity become educational counterbalances. In the following, first, I address student diversity per-

formance in the classroom. Then I discuss pedagogical strategies for enriching classroom diversity, thus preparing students to actively engage with diversity issues in their social interaction.

During a 2024 seminar on Communication Theories, 40 students were tasked with analyzing media representations of social issues. Of 11 group presentations, five focused on gender issues, five talked about trending topics such as "wage slaves" on social media, while one group addressed media representations of Uyghurs on Microblog and X. The only presentation on ethnicity framed Uyghur issues as a geopolitical conflict—a political weapon for the West to attack the Chinese government—while the student presenters did not consider the voices of the Uyghurs themselves. Both male and female students are gender-sensitive; however, they did not demonstrate interest in other categories of social diversity, such as race, ethnicity, religion or disability. As for the five presentations on gender issues, none of the groups probed the issue from the perspective of underclass women or women from minority groups. Gender is an exceptional topic for the students because it is an inescapable concept within their social stratum, while other diversity factors are easily overlooked. In the seminar discussion after the presentations, students suggested that few courses called their attention to diversity issues related to race, ethnicity, religion and disability in the Chinese context, while their narrow range of experiences —mainly the family, schooling and social media experiences—were too restricted for them to participate in in-depth discussions on the broader diversity-related topics. This student perception is largely a co-product of the structural social conditions, the homogeneity of the student body in private liberal arts colleges, and limited physical exposure and media exposure to diverse social realities in their socialization processes in Chinese Mainland.

The structural homogeneity has inadvertently created a challenging environment, affecting students engaging with the richness of cultural differences and social realities in both Chinese and global communities. In China, the social-class concentration of college student populations in general has been widely discussed among scholars (Zhang and Ma, 2023; Zhou, 2023), which clearly demonstrates the dual trend of 1) population decrease of students from poor and rural families and 2) their disadvantages in social mobility. Rich students, the other side of Chinese social stratification, are competing in the global arena while remaining privileged in local societies (Chiang, 2022). Worse, according

to Chiang (2022), Chinese elite parents are keeping their children within their classist privilege in the elite networks; in other words, separating the privileged youth from non-elite social groups. Tensions between higher education and stratum differentiation, along with "the widening income inequality" (Li, Meng and Zhang, 2023), are weaving Chinese students into a hierarchical system, which has influenced student learning, classroom discussions and educational explorations of social realities from a wide range of diversity spectrums. Helping students understand the world we are living in and cultivating responsible citizens in both Chinese and global societies has become a great challenge, especially in the booming private liberal arts colleges in China. As a Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at such a college that aims to nurture the "whole person" through liberal arts education, I have experienced these challenges first-hand. Before proceeding in the following section to pegagogical practices that explore social realities with students, I want to highlight my stance in addressing the student body issue teaching interventions: I focus on "structural causes rather than blaming the students for their own privilege" (Cresswell et al., 2013) and strive "beyond anti-elitism" (Gordon, 2010), thus favoring the transformation from the pedagogy of the privileged to a more social-inclusive practice reflective of current social realities.

Pedagogical Actions

Remarking on the structural homogeneity of the student body and the student diversity performance in the classroom, this article calls for sustained social-inclusion pegagogical strategies to motivate students to probe into social diversity and differences, thus building bridges to connect students with different people and ideas, thus providing possible solutions for a commonly livable world. In my courses in Media Studies, over the past two years, therefore, I have sought to encourage students to address explicitly topics such as the digital divide, the unequal access to information, the uneven dispersion of media technology, and the media representations of marginalized groups.

In terms of both academic and pegagogical responses to the current DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) crisis at the societal level (Comello et al., 2024), I embrace the concepts of 'plural communities' and 'social differences' rather than the general term 'diversity' in my teaching. Here, it is necessary to briefly revisit the tensions between 'diversity' and 'difference'. Bhabha (2006) questions "whose diversity" and argues that "the revision of the history of

critical theory rests on the notion of cultural difference, not cultural diversity." Ingold (2018) also asserts that we are living in "a world not of similarity but of manifold difference," as differences bind all people together – there is no "I" without "them" while there is no "us" without "others" in a community. In this regard, "shared values" among plural communities can only be achieved by recognizing social differences and hybridity rather than emphasizing the systematic or static 'diversity' in a multicultural framework. Take China's ethnic diversity for instance, in this country where ethnic Han make up 91.11% of its overall population, voices from the 55 ethnic minority groups could possibly be marginalized, owing in part to the demographic structure and unequal distribution of wealth. Other minority groups in terms of factors such as gender, age, class, disability, religion, language, diaspora could also suffer from the elites' cultural bias, ignorance or lack of understanding. When the bonding sense of pluralism is eroded among community groups, as Lang (1999) argues, higher education should take action to transform the values of pluralism into pedagogical strategies for social change. Lang's hope for liberal arts education in the US has not become outdated or narrowly applicable only to American society; rather, it is becoming urgent in the current neoliberal complex with the rising DEI concerns in Chinese and other global communities. Below are some of the possibilities I envision.

* *Take action through pedagogical practices; go beyond elitism and anti-elitism*. In the scholarly discussions on the pedagogy of the privileged (Gordon, 2010; Cresswell et al., 2013; Mintz, 2021), the academic left sets much of the agenda in humanities departments in higher education institutions in Western societies; however, they are always in the position of astute critic and protester but not policy maker. This reflects a structural dilemma for teachers who want to develop social class-sensitive pedagogies to make a difference in a neoliberal context. Faculty members in the market-oriented joint-venture liberal arts colleges face a similar challenge: how to achieve a pedagogical balance of elitist academic excellence while getting students engaged in DEI issues. Should instructors encourage students 'purely' to be critics or to begin doing micro-practical projects that address the structural dilemma? Gordon (2010) developed, for instance, a Black Studies programme to "seek the illumination of blind spots and active acts of erasure of more traditional disciplinary rubrics." Jones and Vagle (2013) envision a theory of social class–sensitive pedagogy for teachers to work towards changes by listening and un-

derstanding the specific situations that vulnerable students are facing. Chakravarty (2019) introduces strategies of teaching about the global "other" by using critical feminist pedagogical praxis that makes her classroom a site for examining epistemic injustices and colonizing acts to explore concepts of 'women', 'gender' and 'sexuality' in the transnational context and discuss how these concepts work on individual students in her very 'international' classroom in the US. I carry on their spirit of "taking action" in teaching practices rather than 'purely' being a critic.

* *Develop a new research-oriented course "Media and Migration Issues" to cultivate social difference-sensitive abilities for students from Media Studies.* This course requires students to investigate migration in Zhuhai City through media production analysis (policies, funding, technologies), textual analysis (media representations), and audience studies (media uses). Students developed their independent projects on media and inward/outward or regular/irregular migration phenomena, in which social factors such as class, gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, language, diaspora or transborder are discussed. The case closest to "home" that some students analyzed is how the middle-aged female migrant housekeepers working in student halls use social media such as WeChat and TikTok, while the cases of remoter geographical scope concern media representations of the boat people and Uyghur vendors (ethnic minorities), and the media uses of specific migrants such as the trans-border pilgrims or schooling/shopping groups. Although some students found the on-site fieldwork for the research project overwhelming, their final reports show they gained a better understanding of 'social differences' and 'plural communities' in Media Studies. After the semester ended, a student emailed me to express her renewed understanding of the elderly group and their smartphone usage and her desire to pursue further related research in her MA studies.

* *Carry out small projects to explore social realities.* In June 2023, I collaborated with students majoring in Media Studies at my institute to create a photojournalism exhibition themed "Others in Our Everyday Life," which curated both traditional visual photography and "non-visual photography" (photos taken by visually-impaired photographers). The exhibition featured marginalized social groups such as (trans-border) migrant workers, ragpickers, and visually-impaired or hearing-impaired people. Among the displayed photos, some were taken by visually impaired Tibetan photographers, and they felt empowered after receiving students designed and post-

ed exhibition certificates for their collections. This reciprocity highlights a unique social difference, extending beyond the Han Chinese perspective. By "doing" and "seeing," student curators and exhibition viewers learned about both non-visual photography and the Tibetan culture. They were surprised that visually impaired people could use regular cameras, which rely heavily on sight, to take photos and share their views of the world from different parts of China. I believe a small campus project like this exhibition that invites student participants to rethink social factors such as class, disability and ethnicity plays an important role in enriching students' diversity experience and encourages them to explore a range of unfamiliar social realities.

***** *Combine classroom with campus life and community service to "rehearse" citizenship*. As Lang (1999) has suggested, educators should combine courses in the classroom, student living experiences on campus, and community services together to achieve the goal of liberal arts education. Driven by a belief that community newspapers would contribute to "the maintenance of community stability and community adjustment to change in the larger social environment" (Hindman, 1996), in September 2024 I initiated a college-community-based newspaper with students who major in Media Studies and who are enrolled in the compulsory courses, Reporting Lab and Advanced Reporting and Writing. The newspaper, *The Lychee Quarterly*, serves members on campus, the village community in the neighbourhood where the college is located, and college communities in Zhuhai City. The first issue of the newspaper had DEI-themed stories: 1) female students leading the provincial Lion Dance competition, showing strength and empowerment in a non-traditional field for women; 2) the challenges faced by international students, especially those who do not speak Chinese; 3) a call to acknowledge and respect campus cleaners. The second issue of the newspaper includes stories about wheelchair users and accessible facilities. It also covers food vendors that provide halal and vegetarian options for students and staff in university canteens. All print stories in the newspaper–given as course assignments—are written and edited by students. This encourages students to think and contribute to a shared "we" by creating a community media and collaborating with other members closely.

This study underscores the urgent need for social-inclusion pedagogies in Chinese liberal arts colleges to counteract the effects of structural homogeneity and neoliberal marketization. By integrating critical frameworks that prioritize social difference over static notions of diversity, educa-

tors can challenge privileged students to engage meaningfully with marginalized perspectives. Pedagogical interventions—such as community-driven media projects, research-oriented courses on migration, and collaborative journalism—demonstrate that experiential learning fosters empathy and critical analysis of inequality. These strategies not only enrich students' understanding of plural communities but also empower them to envision equitable societal changes. While structural barriers like high tuition fees and regional disparities persist, the success of micro-level initiatives highlights the transformative potential of an education rooted in equity. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of such pedagogies in Chinese Mainland and compare them with the diversity efforts of liberal arts colleges in Hong Kong SAR, Japan, Korea and the US. In an increasingly polarized and fragmented world, reimagining liberal arts education as a tool for bridging divides remains vital.

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