

REPRESENTING “WORLD-CLASS” UNIVERSITIES: TOP CHINESE UNIVERSITIES’  
DIGITAL DIPLOMACY ON X/TWITTER

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

In an era where social media plays an increasingly important role in global communication, universities worldwide actively use various platforms to increase their visibility, shape their institutional identities and engage with international audiences. While extensive research has examined how universities in the West utilize social media for branding and engagement, less attention has been given to how universities in non-Western contexts navigate these digital spaces. In this dissertation, I examined how top Chinese universities represented themselves on X (formerly known as Twitter). Despite the platform's inaccessibility within China, these universities strategically use it to engage global audiences and construct their institutional prestige. In my analysis, I focused on four leading C9 League universities, namely Peking University, Tsinghua University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Zhejiang University, and investigated how they employ social media to construct their global image through their social media representations.

To conduct this study, I employed multimodal discourse analysis, drawing on Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation, Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis (CDA), Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar, and Heinrich's (2017) photographic techniques. This framework allowed me to examine the interplay between text, imagery, and composition in the social media posts and to unpack the ideological dimensions embedded in these representations. Through this framework, I explored how these universities strategically constructed narratives of global excellence across three key themes: research excellence, student engagement in China's cultural diplomacy, and global partnerships. My findings revealed how social media representations reinforced discourses about Chinese higher education's aspirations for world-class status, its role in China's soft power strategy, and its efforts toward

internationalization. In this dissertation, I mainly argue that through multimodal representations on X/Twitter, top Chinese universities actively construct and reinforce the idea of the “world-class university” by foregrounding research excellence, student engagement in cultural diplomacy, and global partnerships. They use digital diplomacy as a tool for promoting international engagement, enhancing institutional prestige, and exercising China’s soft power.

The findings of my study contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between media, education, and geopolitics in the representation of Chinese universities. My dissertation advances scholarship in higher education studies and cultural studies by offering insights into the strategic use of social media for institutional representation within a globally competitive landscape. It also calls for a more critical and pluralistic reimagining of what it means to be a world-class university, challenging Western-dominated paradigms and advocating for more contextually diverse definitions of excellence in the context of global higher education.

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This dissertation is dedicated to those who believe that social media should empower voices,  
foster meaningful conversations and challenge hegemonic narratives.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Over the past five years, faculty members at #ZJU authored more than 82,500 academic papers pertaining to the 17 #SDGs, achieving strong research outcomes in good health and well-being, sustainable cities and communities, and affordable clean energy. #SDG #Z4G” (ZJU, 2024, January 21).

“‘As the high-speed trains zipped by, I was struck by the profound impacts of #BRI on economy and culture to my homeland,’ said an Indonesian #NextGen during their investigation on the one-stop one-view design of #Whoosh that combines modernity and local tradition.” (THU, 2024, March 16).

The tweets above, posted on X (formerly known as Twitter), by Zhejiang University (ZJU) and Tsinghua University (THU), showcased the significant achievements and moments from their respective institutions in 2024. ZJU’s tweet highlighted the university’s remarkable contributions to scientific research by emphasizing its academic productivity aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, it is important to note that the accompanying image (see Figure 2) in this tweet particularly features a male researcher in a lab setting. Given that many SDGs focus on social justice, including gender equity as one of the goals, this representation raises critical questions about why ZJU selected a male figure in a lab setting to symbolize its research achievements and its alignment with the SDGs.

THU’s tweet illustrated the university’s engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by featuring an international student’s reflections from Indonesia. Through emphasizing the emotional and cultural resonance of infrastructure developments like high-speed trains and the admiration expressed by international students, THU appears to strategically project China’s global influence. As readers of the tweet, we might further question whether this selective

representation, grounded in admiration from international students, is intended as an effort by Chinese universities to strengthen China's global soft power through the representation of its higher education.

Another intriguing question to ask is, due to internet censorship, most people in China are unable to access X/Twitter, so why are ZJU and THU, two top Chinese universities, active on X/Twitter and are tweeting in English? It is probably apparent to speculate that the X/Twitter accounts of Chinese universities are primarily targeting international audiences. However, what is worthwhile to discover is what messages are these Chinese universities trying to convey to their international audiences through X/Twitter, and how are they representing their institutions on a global social media platform that is generally inaccessible to local Chinese users? In this dissertation, I aim to provide insights into these questions.

As the researcher of this study, I draw on my transnational experiences across Chinese and Western higher education systems to critically examine how top Chinese universities represent themselves on X/Twitter. My academic journey—from studying at an international branch campus in China to pursuing graduate education in Canada and the United States—has afforded me a unique vantage point. As someone who is both deeply embedded in Chinese cultural and educational contexts and academically trained within Western institutions, I navigate and interpret the tensions, negotiations, and aspirations embedded in these representations with nuanced insight. This dual positionality enables me to recognize the often-subtle ways in which Chinese universities strategically align with or resist Western norms while advancing their own narratives of world-class status. It also allows me to question dominant assumptions in global higher education discourse, including the privileging of Western epistemologies and ranking systems. My prior research on internationalization, global academic hierarchies, and Western

privilege informs a critical awareness of how representation is both shaped by and shapes global power dynamics. At the same time, my insider perspective as a Chinese scholar ensures cultural sensitivity and contextual accuracy when interpreting institutional strategies and rhetorical choices. This dual lens—both critical and culturally grounded—strengthens the depth, reflexivity, and relevance of the research.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The phenomenon of using media for branding purposes is not new in higher education, in fact, media logic—the process of using media to communicate information—often drives promotion strategies by higher education institutions (Stack, 2016). Unlike other forms of online media, which expect passive consumption or one-time engagements, social media can quickly reach a large number of audiences – it is cost-effective, highly interactive and encourages daily engagement (Mamic & Almareaz, 2013). Research shows that social media is an effective platform for connecting universities’ brands with audiences, making institutions visible, improving reputation, and attracting prospective students (Peruta & Shields, 2017). More recently, studies have highlighted how social media is now central to university marketing, encompassing functions beyond branding to include student engagement, enrollment influence, and strategic communication (Pawar, 2024; Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024). These platforms allow universities to construct institutional narratives that shape perceptions of credibility, identity, and excellence.

The intersection of social media and higher education branding presents a critical area, particularly within context of Chinese higher education which has been yet understudied. In today’s digital age, social media platforms have become essential tools for communication and information dissemination. By posting information and engaging with audiences on social media

daily, higher education institutions can enhance their visibility, engage with diverse audiences, and shape their brand image in ways that were not possible before (Peruta & Shields, 2017). By studying universities' representation on social media, researchers can uncover insights into the evolving dynamics of higher education branding in the digital era. This includes understanding how social media platforms influence perceptions of universities and the impact of online reputation on various stakeholders (Beneito-Montagut, 2019). Such knowledge not only benefits university administrators seeking to remain competitive in a crowded marketplace for students, faculty, and research funding but also informs policymakers and educators about the changing landscape of higher education.

Since the Chinese higher education sector has experienced rapid growth and transformation in recent decades, studying the Chinese context is essential for gaining a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the global higher education landscape. With significant investments in building world-class universities and increasing internationalization efforts, Chinese universities are actively leveraging social media platforms to enhance their global visibility and reputation. Understanding how top Chinese universities represent themselves on social media platforms like X/Twitter provides valuable insights into their branding strategies and aspirations for global recognition.

However, existing studies that examine the roles of social media for higher education branding are overwhelmingly quantitative (e.g., Bélanger et al., 2014; Kimmons et al., 2017; Veletsianos et al., 2017). While the literature acknowledges the transformative potential of social media data, the existing research predominantly focuses on Western contexts, leaving a notable gap in understanding social media representations by universities in non-Western context (Murthy, 2016). Recent comparative studies have begun to explore social media strategies

among universities across various cultural contexts, revealing distinct communication norms and branding logics in non-Western contexts (e.g., Bamberger et al., 2020; Capriotti et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023; Paladan, 2018). Among existing literature, some have studied the representations of top-ranked universities by analyzing university websites (Bae et al., 2021; Stack, 2016), others studied how universities and global university rankers use marketing materials and media outlets to depict world-class education and normalize whiteness (Estera & Shahjahan, 2018; Xu, 2022).

Social media data has the capacity to give researchers insights into things that we have never been able to see before, and many types of inferences about the social world can be made from X/Twitter data. X/Twitter particularly affords in-the-moment content such as textual comments, photos, links, etc. (Murthy 2016). Current research has emphasized that this real-time, multimodal nature of social media provides an invaluable source of data for studying how universities craft identity narratives and symbolic affiliations, especially in high-stakes geopolitical and reputational contexts (Pawar, 2024). There is a plethora of scholarship that examines the use of social media by Western universities and global university rankers for marketing has emerged in the past decade (e.g., Bélanger et al., 2014; Liang & Stack, 2022; Maresova et al., 2020; Motta & Barbosa, 2018; Pérez-Bonaventura & Rodríguez-Llorente, 2023; Pringle & Fritz, 2018; Shahjahan, 2021).

However, the use of social media by universities in non-Western contexts to amplify their representations of excellence, remains absent. Despite the widespread adoption of media logics for promotional purposes in higher education institutions globally (Stack, 2016), the specific role and impact of social media in shaping the image of Chinese universities among social media audiences and higher education stakeholders, especially the elite “China 9 University Leagues”, remain unexplored.

The analysis of X/Twitter use by Chinese universities presents a unique and insightful case for examining how these institutions employ social media for branding strategies abroad. Due to internet regulations, many platforms including X/Twitter are inaccessible to the general public in China. However, there are official attempts by Chinese higher education institutions to establish a presence on social media platforms that are blocked domestically. Consequently, China's situation is distinct from other countries with rapidly growing higher education sectors, specifically because of these restrictions on internet use within its borders. This paradox—of global outreach through inaccessible platforms—highlights a key tension between national internet sovereignty and global academic visibility, making the case of Chinese universities particularly important in today's platform-driven academic diplomacy. By studying how Chinese higher education is represented on Twitter, we can gain deeper insights into how these institutions navigate international social media for global engagement and reputation building.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Among universities in non-Western countries, Chinese higher education is an important subject to study due to its fast growth in scale and enrollment, drastic rise in scientific publications, and great performance in global university rankings (Piracha, et al., 2022). Higher education policy in China facilitates the country to build world-class universities and the massification of higher education prepares its population to have greater chances to attend higher education institutions for the knowledge-based economy (Constant, et al., 2013; Hartley & Jarvis, 2022). To build world-class universities, the Chinese Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance dedicate significant funding to elite universities in China, and the “China 9 University Leagues” (C9) established in 2003 are the most well-resourced, prestigious, and research-intensive universities in China (Guo, 2020). C9 universities (includes Peking



University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Nanjing University, Zhejiang University, the University of Science and Technology of China, Harbin Institute of Technology, and Xi'an Jiaotong University) are striving to transform themselves into world-class universities by enhancing research capacity, reforming institutional governance, and facilitating international collaborations (Guo, 2020). As the “Ivy League” of China, C9 universities receive most of the funding from China’s central government and are aimed for the competitions with other global elite universities in Western countries (Allen, 2017).

Based on those features of C9 universities, I define them as top universities in China. This definition aligns with Altbach and Salmi’s (2011) conceptualization of the contested term “world-class universities”, which are distinguished by a concentration of talented individuals, ample resources for teaching and research, and governance structures that support effective administration and leadership. Among C9 universities, four of them are active on X/Twitter (i.e., Peking University, Tsinghua University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Zhejiang University) to facilitate global communications and engage international audiences. Notably, all four universities are reputable, globally top-ranked, and located in most economically developed cities in China (Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou) drawing on an urban population. All four universities either identify themselves as globally prestigious institutions or express aspirations to become world-class universities in the “About” sections of their official websites. ZJU describes itself as “a world-class university...that will transform lives and improve China and the world” (Zhejiang University, n.d.). SJTU states that it is “sailing towards the goal of becoming a comprehensive, innovative, and internationalized world-class university” (Shanghai Jiao Tong University, 2021). PKU notes that “the University has made remarkable achievements...which paves the way for a world-class university” (Peking University, n.d.-a). Although THU does not

explicitly label itself as a world-class university, it emphasizes that “Tsinghua is one of the most prestigious universities in China” (Tsinghua University, 2020). Based on their self-proclaimed identities, I refer to them as top-tier or world-class Chinese universities in this study and interpret their social media activities targeting international audiences as part of their efforts to construct world-class identities.

Through a multimodal analysis, I will strive not only to interpret the underlying meanings of narratives, images, and symbols posted by four esteemed Chinese universities on X/Twitter but also to explore how these universities are actively proving and creating their image of world-class status through their social media presence. I will systemically unpack a substantial set of X/Twitter posts, by four leading C9 universities in China – Peking University, Tsinghua University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Zhejiang University. I will focus on examining the social media representations, employing Stuart Hall’s (1997) concept of “representation” – a process to produce meaning that are not fixed or real but are constructed and defined by society. By focusing on what has been represented by Chinese universities on the U.S.-based social media platform, I also aim to shed light on how these contents are represented. Moreover, I aim to critically evaluate how the social media representation shape, reproduce, and fix the meaning of a world-class Chinese university. By doing so, my study not only contributes to the understanding of social media’s role in Chinese higher education’s world-class university imaginaries but also advocates for a nuanced and pluralistic reimagining of the notion of a world-class university, emphasizing the importance of cultural and contextual diversification in shaping the identity of modern universities (Stein, 2021; Yang, 2013).

To summarize, the purpose of my study is going to be achieved by answering the following research question: **How do “world-class” Chinese universities represent themselves**

**on X/Twitter?**

### **Significance of the Study**

My research contributes to a deeper understanding of how universities build their brand identity in the era of social media globalization, especially in the Chinese context. Global competition in higher education has pushed universities worldwide to treat online presence as a strategic asset (Maresova et al., 2020). Chinese universities, like their Western counterparts, have embraced social networking platforms as key channels to promote themselves (Xu, 2023). However, much of the existing scholarship on higher education branding and social media focuses on Western institutions or domestic Chinese platforms. By examining Chinese universities on X/Twitter, my study fills a gap in the literature, offering insights into how non-Western institutions project a “world-class” image on global digital platforms. My dissertation enriches the understanding of the social media discourse of higher education with perspectives from China.

The current geopolitical climate makes my study especially urgent. With Donald Trump now in his second presidential term, his administration has already foregrounded aggressive protectionist policies—including sweeping global tariffs (Wong & Epstein, 2025), revoking international students’ visas (Drenon, 2025), significant cuts to federal research funding (Kozlov & Ryan, 2025), renewed rhetoric around national security threats, and the systematic elimination of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives in higher education (Wendling & Epstein, 2025). These actions signal a more combative stance toward China, heightening the fragility of academic collaborations. The termination of partnerships, such as the University of Michigan’s recent decision to end its long-standing joint program with Shanghai Jiao Tong University, marks a broader pattern of decoupling between U.S. and Chinese institutions. This political

backdrop casts new light on the efforts of Chinese universities to maintain a global presence through alternative channels like X/Twitter. My study, therefore, offers a critical foundation for understanding how Chinese institutions have built strategies for legitimacy, prestige, and global connectivity—strategies that have become even more consequential amid the current climate of geopolitical volatility and academic nationalism.

Another significance of my study lies in highlighting the unique situation of Chinese universities reaching international audiences via a platform that is inaccessible at home. In China, only government-approved providers are permitted to offer Virtual Private Network (VPN) services. However, the law allows limited exceptions for certain institutions with legitimate needs, such as those involved in foreign trade, academic research, or education (Li, 2020). In practice, universities may legally access blocked websites by using authorized networks or by securing special telecommunications services (Li, 2020). Granting controlled access to university servers enables Chinese scholars to remain globally competitive and aligns with the government's goal of positioning China as a leader in science and technology (Beech, 2016). Nevertheless, the use of such services remains tightly regulated. X/Twitter and many other Western social media are officially blocked within China, yet many top Chinese universities maintain an active presence on these channels to connect with prospective students, faculty, and partners abroad. This research sheds light on how Chinese institutions strategically use X/Twitter to communicate their academic achievements and global aspirations to the world. Analyzing this phenomenon is important because it illustrates the lengths to which Chinese universities pursue internationalization: they bypass domestic restrictions to engage in global conversations. Thus, in this study, I provide a rare look at how Chinese higher education institutions use social media as a bridge to foreign publics. This aspect is significant for

understanding the interplay between national internet policies and the global ambitions of Chinese universities.

This context is further complicated by the transformation of Twitter into X under Elon Musk's leadership, which has destabilized its role as a central platform for academic communication. Declining trust, user disengagement, and policy changes have all contributed to its uncertain future. For Chinese universities—which already face restrictions at home—X/Twitter has remained one of the few spaces for outward-facing global engagement. My research captures how these institutions adapt to shifting digital terrains and persist in their communicative efforts despite the contested nature of the platform. It sheds light on how global higher education actors must constantly recalibrate strategies amid both technological and political disruption.

Methodologically, the study's multimodal analysis offers significant value by capturing the rich, layered nature of social media communications. University tweets often combine text with images, videos, and other media to create a narrative of excellence. By examining both linguistic and visual elements, my study reveals subtle messaging strategies that a text-only analysis might overlook. Multimodal discourse analysis examines how various communication channels work together to create meaning, considering visuals, text, and other modes as an integrated whole. In the context of this study, such an approach helps decode how imagery and textual content jointly construct the image of a world-class institution. This yields a deeper understanding of the branding messages – for instance, how prestige, innovation, or internationalization are symbolized through visuals in tandem with promotional language. The significance here is that the multimodal approach uncovers the implicit narratives and cultural cues in Chinese universities' self-representations on X/Twitter, providing a more nuanced

interpretation of their branding and communication strategies.

Substantively, this study challenges and enriches prevailing perspectives on the “world-class university” ideal. Discourses of globalization have made the notion of becoming a world-class university a seemingly universal goal, reinforcing an “imaginary” that this status is the pinnacle of modern higher education development (Geerlings & Lundberg, 2018). China is a vivid example of this trend: building world-class universities is an explicit national strategy, with government initiatives supporting dozens of universities in their quest for global excellence. By analyzing how Chinese universities present themselves as world-class on a global social media platform, this study brings a non-Western viewpoint into the conversation about global academic prestige. It illuminates how Chinese institutions interpret and perform the idea of “world-class” in their own terms – for example, which achievements or values they highlight, and how they align with or diverge from Western benchmarks of excellence. This broader perspective is significant because it questions the universality of global ranking metrics and reveals the culturally inflected ways in which the world-class status is imagined. In doing so, my study adds depth to our understanding of global higher education hierarchies, suggesting that the image of excellence is constructed through narratives and symbols as seen on X/Twitter. Such insights help de-center the dominance of Western paradigms and acknowledge diverse expressions of being “world-class.”

### **Definition of Key Terms**

In this section, I define some key terms that will be used throughout the dissertation.

*Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*: Also known as the One Belt One Road, is a global infrastructure development strategy launched in 2013 by the Chinese government to enhance infrastructure, trade and cultural connectivity between Asia, Europe, and Africa. As part of

China's foreign policy, the BRI aims to enhance China's role as a predominant leader in global affairs in accordance with its rising power and status (Yue et al., 2022).

*C9 League*: "China 9 University Leagues" (C9) that was established in 2003, are the "Ivy League" of China. C9 universities include Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Nanjing University, Zhejiang University, the University of Science and Technology of China, Harbin Institute of Technology, and Xi'an Jiaotong University. These universities receive most of the funding from China's central government and are aimed to compete with other global elite universities in Western countries (Allen, 2017).

*Double First-class Initiatives*: Double First-class initiatives launched in 2016, according to China's Ministry of Education, refers to First-class Universities and First-class Disciplines. The Initiative "is a major commitment made by the Chinese government to improve China's higher education power and international competitiveness". Double-first class universities are those identified as "having the potential to become world class to focus on the quality of their development and explore new development models in pursuing solutions to China's issues and serving economic growth and social advancement". In the second phase of the Initiative, 147 higher education institutions were listed for support (Ministry of Education, 2022, February 16).

*Global University Rankings*: Global university rankings rank universities around the world by indicators such as research reputation, faculty/student ratio, internationalization and so on. However, these rankings are not neutral, and they reshape and reproduce the inequality of the global higher education landscape (Stack, 2016). When referring to global university rankings in this paper, I primarily refer to the "Big Three". Stack (2016) defines the three most popular global university rankings as the "Big Three", including Shanghai Ranking or Academic

Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), and the Times Higher Education World University Ranking (THEWUR)

*Project 985 and Project 211:* Project 211 was launched in 1995 in China to develop approximately 100 higher education institutions and critical disciplines by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Project 985 launched in May 1998, set a higher goal for creating world-class Chinese universities. These two projects enhanced the development of Chinese higher education and scientific research. These two projects were replaced by the Double-First-class Initiatives in 2017 by the Ministry of Education (Guo, 2020).

*Social media:* In this paper, social media is defined as a platform that offers features that "position users at the center, enabling them to create profiles, establish connections, share content, and utilize advanced technical functionalities" (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). Facebook, Instagram, X/Twitter and TikTok are famous social media platforms.

*World-class University:* The definition of World-class university is contested and still under debates by scholars and practitioners. Commonly, such institutions are recognized by their outstanding performance in global university rankings. Altbach and Salmi (2011) suggested that world-class universities typically feature a concentration of talented individuals, substantial resources devoted to learning and research, and governance structures conducive to administrative and leadership excellence. In the context of China, Double First-Class Universities are considered as future world-class universities.

*X/Twitter:* Twitter was recognized for its blue and white bird logo for the more than a decade. Before Twitter was renamed to X and replaced the bird logo by Elon Musk in July 2023, to "tweet" was a verb and a "tweet" referred to a post that represented the social media's unique culture (Mac & Hsu, 2023, July 24). In this dissertation, I use X/Twitter to identify this social



media platform, and the term “tweet” used here means post.

## **Overview of the Dissertation**

In this dissertation, I primarily argue that top Chinese universities strategically represent themselves as “world-class” through multimodal signifying practices on X/Twitter. They employ digital diplomacy to showcase research excellence, student engagement in cultural diplomacy, and global partnerships to enhance their prestige and project China’s soft power.

To support this argument, the dissertation is organized into seven chapters. Following this introduction, in Chapter 2, I offer a literature review that situates the study within broader theoretical and empirical discussions on Chinese higher education, the evolving role of social media in global higher education, and the specific influence of X/Twitter in this context. This chapter thus establishes a foundation for understanding how global communication technologies intersect with China’s educational practices.

In Chapter 3, I detail the study’s methodological approach, starting with an articulation of my research paradigm as the researcher. I then introduce cultural studies as the chosen methodological framework, highlighting its effectiveness for examining how culture, power, and representation converge in social media. I also outline the methods used for data collection, selection, and analysis, and critically address the study’s limitations. At the end, I present the theoretical framework that underpins the research, supported by a diagram illustrating how key concepts interact to inform both analysis and interpretation of the data.

From Chapters 4 through 6, I present the core findings, each chapter focusing on a distinct thematic area. In Chapter 4, I investigate how Chinese universities represent their breakthrough research, constructing a narrative of innovation and leadership within the global academic arena. In Chapter 5, I explore the role of student engagement in China’s cultural

diplomacy, examining how students are positioned as cultural ambassadors who contribute to shaping China's global image and reinforce China's soft power. As for Chapter 6, I discuss how Chinese universities represent their global alliances, revealing their influence and strategic collaborations on the international stage.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I conclude the dissertation by synthesizing the key findings and discussing their theoretical and practical implications for global higher education and international communication. In this final chapter, I also reflect on the research process, its contributions, and offer directions for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In this chapter, I review the existing body of literature across three central themes. These themes are: the emergence of world-class universities in China, the integration of social media within higher education, and the specific utilization of X/Twitter in the context of higher education. By engaging with these areas, I aim to provide a comprehensive review of pertinent literature that not only contextualizes the current study but also underlines the imperative need for the research by identifying a critical gap in the existing scholarship. In this chapter, I argue that, despite extensive research on the internationalization of higher education in China and social media usage in Western universities, studies on how world-class Chinese universities use social media for international communication and global engagement are scarce. Through this literature review, I provide the context for my current study. I also demonstrate why my study is necessary to extend the existing literature. Furthermore, my study aims to fill a significant gap, providing insights for researchers in the fields of international higher education, as well as social media and cultural studies.

### **Chinese Higher Education**

In this section of the literature review, I examine scholarly discussions on the topic of Chinese higher education. Before looking into the debates, I first introduce the landscape of Chinese higher education, which covers the development of higher education from ancient to modern China. Additionally, I will discuss policies such as internationalization and world-class university initiatives. These policies drive the development of Chinese higher education. After that, I investigated the literature in two themes, namely, the internationalization of Chinese universities and world-class universities in China. These themes are interconnected, as efforts to achieve world-class status are integral to the broader internationalization agenda. Through this

section, I argue that current research does not address several key areas. First, it overlooks how the internationalization of Chinese higher education is represented on social media. Second, it fails to consider how the idea of world-class Chinese universities is represented by top Chinese universities. Third, it does not examine how global university rankings are marketed by Chinese universities on their social media sites. My study strives to fill this significant gap.

### ***The Landscape of Chinese Higher Education***

Chinese higher education is arguably one of the largest higher education systems in the world. According to China's Ministry of Education (2023, April 3), there are 3013 higher education institutions in China including 234 research universities with 46.55 million students registered across the nation. By 2023, there are 13 Chinese universities ranked in the top 200 globally according to Times Higher education's World University Rankings (Jack, 2023, September 27). In addition to its large scale and performance on global university rankings, Chinese higher education is also one of the world's oldest higher education systems (Wu & Zha, 2018). The establishment of Confucius private academy in the fourth century BCE is argued as the foundation of China's traditional higher education (Galt, 1951; Gu, 1964). China's political and economic power as well as its ambition to become a world leader in global higher education makes it a unique and important site for study.

The development of modern Chinese higher education was accompanied by invasion and colonialism. Since the First Opium War in 1840, China's traditional higher education based on the Confucian knowledge lost its legitimacy due to the Japanese and Western military and cultural invasions (Wu & Zha, 2018). Since the late Qing dynasty and the establishment of the first modern university in the 1890s, knowledge from the West had been noted as the primary way to save China and make the nation strong again (Yang, 2014). As such, Chinese higher

education is hugely influenced and reformed by higher education practices in Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United States. With the proposal and promotion of the “Four Modernizations Policy,” Chinese higher education was reformed to emerge on a more international stage (Yang, 2014). After the Cold War, Chinese universities started to learn and adapt mostly from the higher education system in the United States (Yang, 2018).

Since the late 1970s, when the reform and opening-up policy was introduced in China, the process of internationalization of higher education in China sped up rapidly (Guo et al., 2021). To promote the internationalization of Chinese higher education, more Chinese students and scholars traveled abroad to study; Chinese universities integrated foreign textbooks and adopted English as a supplementary medium of instruction; and the Chinese government encouraged foreign institutions to partner with local universities or programs (Yang, 2014; Zha et al., 2019). Chinese universities also attracted more international students by offering government scholarships and developing English-taught classes (Zha et al., 2019). With the development of internationalization, China has now become one of the world’s largest destinations for international students. By the end of 2023, there are 253177 international students enrolled in China’s higher education institutions. (Ministry of Education, 2023, December, 29). Notably, a large number of international students in China are from the member states of the Belt and Road Initiative nations (Wen & Hu, 2019).

In recent decades, China has demonstrated a strong commitment to establishing world-class universities for national development and global competition. One significant initiative is the introduction of the "Double First-Class" Initiative in 2015, aimed at developing both world-class universities and first-class disciplines (Peters & Besley, 2018). This initiative aims to concentrate limited educational resources towards the establishment of a select group of

research-intensive universities that plays a critical role in advancing the nation's economic and social constructions (Li & Xue, 2022). Furthermore, the “Double First-Class” initiative is designed to enhance the international competitiveness of Chinese universities while simultaneously refining the modern university system with distinctive Chinese characteristics (Li & Xue, 2022).

### ***Internationalization of Chinese Universities***

To understand why Chinese higher education uses social media to engage with audiences outside of China, it is important to know Chinese higher education's efforts on its internationalization. The internationalization of higher education has emerged as a critical agenda for universities worldwide (Altbach & Knight, 2007). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the context of Chinese universities, which have witnessed unprecedented growth and transformation over the past few decades (Zha et al., 2019). As part of its internationalization efforts, using social media platforms such as X/Twitter to engage with international audiences has been adopted by some top-ranked Chinese universities – it offers unprecedented opportunities for universities to extend their reach beyond geographical boundaries and connect with stakeholders around the world (Keith & Van Belle, 2014; Lin, 2019). Before looking into the use of social media in Chinese higher education, it is necessary to understand the development of internationalization in Chinese higher education. In this section, I provide an overview of how literature has been discussed around the topic of internationalization of Chinese higher education and discusses how my study fits and extends this literature.

Among the literature on the internationalization of Chinese higher education, a large amount of work has focused on discussing the concept, development, trends, and challenges of internationalization of Chinese higher education (Bentao, 2011; Chen & Huang, 2013; Li, 2021;

Lin, 2019; Lo & Pan, 2021; Zhu et al., 2012). For instance, some scholars (Bentao, 2011; Lin, 2019; Zhu et al., 2012) offered comprehensive analyses of internationalization strategies adopted by Chinese universities and the government. Bentao's (2011) argued that internationalization is an Important path for achieving world-class universities. Bentao summarized that China's research universities practice internationalization through developing talents who are globally competitive; internationalizing curriculum; encouraging international mobility; and facilitating international collaboration. Building on Bentao's work, Zhu et al.'s (2012) article discussed the driving forces for the internationalization of Chinese universities which include the needs of global collaboration and commercialization of the institutions to generate more funds. The main theme of the literature focuses on analyzing the strategies, challenges, and motivations behind transforming Chinese universities into globally competitive institutions through internationalization. While previous scholarship has extensively discussed traditional strategies, such as curriculum internationalization and academic collaboration, the role of social media remains underexplored. More specifically, the use of social media as the trend and strategy in the internationalization process remains unpacked. Understanding how Chinese universities use social media platforms to enhance their global visibility adds a cultural dimension to the discourse on internationalization.

A significant subset of the literature explores how Chinese universities' internationalization aligns with broader national goals, particularly in terms of economic development and soft power projection. Scholars like Mok and Ong (2013) and Wang (2014) argued that internationalization serves as a tool to enhance China's economic competitiveness and global influence. However, there is a debate regarding the nature of this influence, with some, like Wu (2019) and Zheng and Kapoor (2021), advocating for a more cooperative and

inclusive approach rather than a zero-sum game of soft power competition. Their study enriches the broader conversation on the goals and implications of Chinese higher education's internationalization.

However, none of the current studies has examined the ways in which Chinese universities use social media to represent their internationalization. Thus, my study on investigating Chinese universities' representation of internationalization on social media will not only help in understanding their strategies and impacts but also contributes to the broader discourse on globalization of higher education. However, none of the current studies has examined the ways in which Chinese universities use social media to represent their internationalization. Thus, my study on investigating Chinese universities' representation of internationalization on social media will fill this research gap. My study will provide a novel perspective by analyzing how social media platforms are used to convey and shape the narrative of internationalization. Additionally, my study will examine how such representations contribute to the universities' global presence. In doing so, my current research will extend the existing body of literature by adding a new dimension to our understanding of internationalization strategies in Chinese higher education. My study will also offer practical insights into effective social media practices for institutions aiming to enhance their international visibility.

### ***World-class Universities in China***

Connecting with the theme of the internationalization of Chinese higher education, in this section of the literature review, I will discuss research on the topic of world-class universities in China. I will investigate the development, policy, and debates about Chinese universities' pursuit of world-class university status. In this part of the literature review, I will establish a connection between the overarching pursuit of world-class university status in China and the specific focus



of this study on the social media representation of four leading C9 universities on X/Twitter. By reviewing the development, policies, and debates surrounding Chinese universities' aspirations for global excellence, I provide the context for interpreting the motivations behind the universities' engagement with social media. Understanding the substantial government funding, the competitive landscape of Chinese higher education, and the deliberate initiatives by C9 universities to attain world-class status provides the essential context that shapes how these institutions navigate social media. The link between higher education policy and the use of platforms like X/Twitter for global communication becomes evident, shaping the rationale for studying how these universities represent themselves on this international stage.

The following literature is an examination of how Chinese universities are balancing national and global influences in their strategic planning, particularly in response to the pressures of global university rankings and China's own initiatives to develop world-class universities, leading to both improvements and challenges in the stratification and internationalization of these institutions.

Yang et al. (2021) studied how Chinese universities' strategic plans responded to global forces including scholarly discussions on the world-class university and global university rankings and the national force – China's Double First-Class Project (world first-class university and first-class disciplines). Their study suggested how Chinese research-intensive universities' strategic plans discussed the balance of global and national influences in their development and how they could make contributions to global higher education. Transitioning to the outcomes of world-class university projects, Wang et al.'s (2022) study suggested that the world-class university project in China had reproduced and reinforced the stratification of Chinese universities by identifying world-class and non-world-class. But also, the world-class university

project reshuffled the internal stratified structure of those elite universities because of the “dynamic adjustment” principle of the project. Guo and Li’s (2022) study identified the achievements and problems of the current world-class university project. They pointed out that the project improved top Chinese universities’ global university rankings, increased research productivity, and enhanced and extended internationalization and funding scope. Similarly, Huang (2015) suggested that although different from world-class universities in the West, the Chinese pathway of building world-class universities is characterized with a top-down policy with intensive funding from both national government and local authorities, because of the large impact of global university ranking systems, China is still in the stage of catching up with top universities in the West. The increasing use of Western social media sites by Chinese universities is one of the strategies that Chinese universities respond to the global forces of creating world-class universities.

The current literature explored Chinese universities by examining the influence of world-class initiatives on universities’ organizational behaviors and strategic plans. However, the role that social media plays in depicting world-class aspiration remains absent. My study on the social media representation of top Chinese universities on X/Twitter will address this gap by bringing a cultural studies lens to the debate. In this study, I will emphasize on examining narratives, images, and symbols through a cultural studies approach that offers a fresh perspective on the complex interplay between institutional goals, policies, and representations. This approach will help illuminate the cultural dimensions of world-class initiatives in China, exploring how these universities navigate the balance between global and national influences.

There are several studies closely connected with my current study that investigated issues of representation and inequality in the discourse surrounding world-class universities,

particularly regarding fields of study, race, and gender.

Bae et al. (2023) used Chinese universities' websites to analyze how these universities represent their world-class status through texts and visual images on their websites. By using Critical Discourse Analysis to look at Peking University and Tsinghua University's institutional websites, they find that the world-class university discourse is particularly aligned with the indicators of global university rankings, including research accomplishment and internationalized educational environments. They problematized the concept of a world-class university by questioning if there is only one way to be a world-class university. For instance, the concept of "research" is often represented by images of "hard sciences" and "men in labs" and "internationalization" is often depicted as "white skin colour and Western institutions" (p. 156). These representations of world-class university discourse are seen as reproductions of social inequalities in terms of race and gender. This is reinforced by Woo's (2023) study. Through poststructural discourse analysis, Woo suggested that the notion of world-class university is merely a technical, managerial (human resources recruitment, funding for research output, and internationalization strategies) and a top-down organizational problem (state-led central planning). In other words, the world-class university initiatives did not clarify a broad definition of world-class and these policies are just a continuation of past policies to develop Chinese higher education. While similar to Bae et al.'s (2023) finding on the representation of "science", Woo (2023) also noted that hard science appeared much more often than humanities and social sciences in policy documents. However, although some studies have suggested that not being Western enough is a "problem", in the Chinese context, Woo (2023) mentioned that world-class university policy also tries to avoid the danger of "becoming too Western" (p. 647). This idea echoes Yang et al.'s (2021) discussion on balancing global and national influences. The main

theme of this literature review is the analysis of how Chinese universities represent their world-class status through discourse with global ranking indicators, while also critically examining the underlying racial, gender, and academic biases in these representations and questioning the narrow, managerial focus of world-class university policies that may perpetuate social inequalities and historical education policies.

However, these studies only looked at websites and policy documents, a significant gap emerges in understanding the role of branding and the influence of popular culture in shaping the global image of these institutions. My study is going to extend the current literature by adding insights on universities' representation from social media data by bringing a cultural studies lens to the debate. It recognizes that branding, particularly through popular culture platforms like X/Twitter, is a nuanced and understudied phenomenon in the world-class initiatives literature. By investigating how these universities utilize social media to construct their identity, my study will contribute to a richer understanding of the cultural dynamics and symbolic meanings embedded in the pursuit of global excellence. Through the examination of X/Twitter representation, my current study pioneers a cultural studies lens within the world-class initiatives discourse, enriching the scholarly conversation and offering new insights into the broader implications of global academic prestige.

### **Social Media in Higher Education**

Social media has become an integral part of modern society, influencing various aspects of people's daily life, including education (Junco & Clem, 2015). In recent years, its impact on higher education has garnered significant attention from scholars. In this literature review, I explore the role of social media in higher education, focusing on two key themes: its utilization in teaching and learning, and its implications for higher education marketing and engagement.

Through this literature review, I provide a foundational understanding that informs the analysis of Chinese universities' representation on social media. I also offer insights into the strategies and approaches employed by universities globally, which can be applied to the context of Chinese universities' presence on social media.

### ***Social Media in Teaching and Learning***

Although research and international outlook are important indicators of achieving world-class status for higher education institutions, teaching and learning are also critical functions for universities' reputation and students' experiences. Teaching and learning are also major themes to be represented by universities on social media. In this section, I explore how the use of social media has been discussed in teaching and learning in higher education and identifies what is absent in the current literature that is related to this study.

Among the literature, many researchers argued the positive impact of social media in teaching and learning in higher education settings. Stathopoulou et al. (2019) explored social media as a supporting tool in undergraduate education. Their research demonstrates that social media can induce deep, higher-level learning and understanding, enhance experiential learning and help students enhance valuable skills and reinforce memory and accommodate learning styles with visual elements. Similarly, Rasiah (2014) studied the use of Facebook in a team-based learning environment. Rasiah's results showed that Facebook was perceived as an innovative and effective tool in a student-centered learning environment. It increases the relevance of the subject matter and encourages students to collaborate effectively with their peers and faculty. In addition, Neier and Zayer's (2015) study examined students' perspectives on social media as a pedagogical tool and they find that their sample of students believe some potential in using social media for learning in the classroom because of their desire to be

interactive. A recent study by Shahzad et al. (2025) examined the impact of generative AI and social media on university students in China and they found that both have a positive effect on students' academic performance and psychological well-being. These studies collectively shed light on the potential of social media in enhancing education, emphasizing its role in fostering student engagement, collaboration, and interaction.

While some studies emphasize the potential benefits of social media, such as increased engagement and collaboration among students, others highlight significant limitations and challenges. Stathopoulou et al. (2019) noted that certain conditions need to be met for social media to be effective in enhancing teaching and learning, and faculty need to invest time and effort in using relevant material to support their course. This is particularly salient in the Global South contexts, as Sobaih et al. (2016) studied how social media has been used in Egyptian context and found that the use of social media by faculty was at a minimal level. Manca and Ranieri's (2016) study reaffirmed Sabaih et al.'s idea, asserting that the actual use of social media in teaching is still limited due to cultural resistance, pedagogical issues and institutional constraints. The impact of social media on academic performance is debated. Junco (2012) found a negative link between Facebook use and academic performance, and Cooke (2017) noted that many students view social media as a supplementary not primary educational tool. Some literature questioned the enhancement of learning through social media, with studies like Lacka et al. (2021) suggesting it may be the least efficient means to support students in higher education. In a study conducted in Bangladesh, Chowdhury (2024) suggested that excessive reliance on social media can hinder innovation, as students could depend too much on easily accessible information. As for faculty, a recent study by Sabiri et al. (2025) suggested that female and older faculty members expressed greater concerns about the usability and reliability

of social media content, resulting in lower adoption and confidence in these platforms. These perspectives present conflicting views on social media's role in teaching and learning in higher education.

The current literature on social media in teaching and learning presents a comprehensive exploration from educators and students' perspectives. However, the existing research is primarily focused on Western contexts, with limited attention to how institutions use social media for the representation of teaching and learning. There is a notable gap in understanding the unique ways Chinese universities utilize platforms like X/Twitter to portray their educational practices.

### ***Social Media in Marketing and Engagement***

The use of social media for higher education marketing has been well studied in the Western context. Peruta and Shields (2017) examined top U.S. universities' Facebook posts, revealing that Facebook serves as a platform for prospective students to gather information about colleges and universities. Their findings indicated that liberal arts colleges, despite posting less frequently, receive proportionally more engagement on Facebook than public and private universities. Moreover, Clark et al. (2017) studied the use of social media by higher education institutions for marketing, establishing a positive association between students following their universities' social media sites and the perception of a high-quality relationship. This suggested that investing in social media communications is crucial for maintaining strong relationships with students and other stakeholders. Contrary to these findings, an earlier study conducted in the Netherlands by Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011) suggested that, while students are interested in using social media for social interaction and information seeking, social media channels still play a secondary role in prospective students' university choice compared to

traditional forms of university marketing. Similarly, a study conducted in New Zealand also suggested the lack of confidence of using social media for branding. Khan (2013) used Social Media Marketing Attributes Analysis to investigate the use of social media marketing by New Zealand universities. The study demonstrated that although there is a need from the consumer end for social media to be used as a marketing channel, universities in New Zealand questioned the effectiveness of social media marketing and there is a lack of confidence on relying on social media for marketing. Additionally, Brech et al. (2017) explored the relationship between universities' Facebook page interactivity and the number of fans, identifying a university's reputation and size as two major factors determining fan numbers. Their results recommend an optimal posting frequency of about four posts, as too many or too few postings can decrease interactivity on social media sites, and longer postings can attract more engagement. Beyond institutional use of social media, Shahjahan et al. (2021) investigated how commercial rankers utilize social media to amplify and foster affect. Drawing on affect theory, their study demonstrated how university rankers engage with higher education audiences through social media, emphasizing the role of students as consumers and reinforcing universities' behavior as market competitors. By using social media as affective infrastructure, these commercial rankers sell hope to their audience and normalize rankings in global higher education. These studies collectively provide a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted role of social media in higher education marketing, highlighting its impact on information gathering, relationship building, and the broader landscape of global university rankings.

In recent years, there is also an emerging scholarship investigate the use of social media for marketing and attracting prospective students in non-Anglo-Saxon contexts, such as Eastern Europe (Biczysko & Jabłońska, 2016), Middle East (Bamberger et al., 2017), Asia and Africa



(Juhaidi, 2024; Paladan, 2018; Taecharungroj, 2017)). Biczysko and Jabłońska (2016) studied social media marketing by all public Polish universities. Their results showed that Facebook, Instagram and YouTube are well used and having a Facebook fan page has become an informal standard in Polish higher education's marketing strategy. In the Middle East context, Bamberger et al. (2017) studied Facebook posts of two Israeli universities to learn how they represent themselves to attract international students. Through Qualitative Content Analysis, they found that the representation builds the expectation of academic experience for international students. Therefore, universities posted more stories and profiles of their international students, and this university attracted more international students than universities that showcased their prestige and achievements. In addition, they found that nation branding is significant in international student marketing because it constructed the image of who is desired and who belongs to the university and the nation. In studies focused on the other part of the world, Paladan (2018) studied how top 25 universities in Asia and Africa use social media for marketing through a qualitative descriptive case study approach. The study found that top universities in Asia and Africa use a variety of social media platforms as a cost-efficient tool to market their academic programs and post information about events and research. There is also research studying Asian universities' social media use by comparing it with universities in the West. By using content analysis, Taecharungroj (2017) comparatively studied how top universities in the U.S. and Thailand use Facebook for marketing. The study found that universities primarily post seven themes on social media, namely "research, faculty, curriculum, campus, students, alumni, industry, events, products, image and reputation, announcements" (p. 122). Top universities in the U.S. posted research more frequently while Thai universities frequently posted institutional announcements. In addition, a recent study by Juhaidi (2024) explored the use of social media

for marketing in Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia. The research found that these universities utilized various marketing strategies in their social media content, but there was an imbalance in how these strategies were represented. Specifically, the study revealed that posts on Instagram were mostly focused on the “people” or personnel aspect, while Facebook posts emphasized the “process” (e.g., process of admission, registration or exams) element. The study recommends that universities adopt a more balanced approach in managing their social media presence, ensuring that all key marketing aspects are represented equally in their posts.

Social media, beyond its role in higher education marketing, serves as a significant tool for engagement among various stakeholders. Empirical research has endorsed the effectiveness of social media in communicating with Chinese international students. Zhu’s (2019) study looked at UK higher education institutions’ use of Chinese social media and finds the positive association between the social media engagement and increase in Chinese international student enrollment. Zhu suggested that interaction with followers may build trust between the institutions and prospective students and can attract more followers. Using localized social media platforms can be especially effective tools for engaging students from a diverse cultural background. Similarly, Liang and Stack’s (2022) comparative study investigated how top Canadian universities use Facebook and Weibo (a Chinese social media site) to facilitate their engagement and communications with prospective students. This study showed that on Weibo, the Canadian university articulates its global rankings and a desirable lifestyle for Chinese students who can afford to consume. Transitioning from the use of social media for engaging with prospective students, research has explored how Chinese students adapt to life in U.S. higher education through social media use. Forbush and Foucault-Welles’s (2016) research found that Chinese students who use social media more often during their study abroad

preparations usually have larger and more diverse social networks abroad and have a higher level of social and academic adoption in the U.S. Social media is helpful for students' social engagement, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Shifting from student adaptation, social media's role during the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education has also been scrutinized. Papademetriou et al. (2022) studied the impact of social media on higher education during the pandemic and they suggest that social media is significant in developing community connection and supporting and motivating students. Particularly, social media facilitates students to build connections beyond the real world and connect with a diverse group of people for addressing the regional, class and ethnic barriers. They recommend universities to invest in social media technologies to establish further connections within university communities. However, not all aspects of social media use during the pandemic have been positive. Hou et al. (2020) studied the depression and anxiety among social media users during the COVID-19 outbreak in China, and they suggested that because social media is often the main resource of information related to COVID-19, there was an increased prevalence of depression and anxiety in Chinese population during the pandemic.

There are some research discussed the use of China's domestic social media platforms by Chinese universities. In the recent decade, Chinese universities have increasingly turned to domestic social media platforms—such as WeChat, Weibo, and Bilibili—as strategic tools for institutional communication, branding, and student engagement. Qiao et al. (2015) identified three major functions of official Weibo accounts: disseminating news and policy, managing crises, and constructing a positive institutional image. This communicative role is especially critical during public opinion events, where timely updates and responsive messaging help mitigate reputational risks (Jiang, 2024). Although, platforms like Bilibili have emerged as

marketing frontiers, Li, et al (2023) evaluated 296 universities' Bilibili accounts and found that only a small fraction were efficient in turning content production into meaningful engagement. These findings echo Zhang et al.'s (2016) analyses of Weibo accounts, which showed that many universities failed to optimize interactive features and often relied on repetitive messaging.

Beyond external marketing, social media plays an integral role in internal community-building and educational communication. WeChat, the most widely used platform among students, supports a robust ecosystem of official university accounts, departmental channels, and student-run WeMedia initiatives. These accounts not only disseminate practical campus updates but also foster participatory campus culture by offering event sign-ups, commenting features, and peer-to-peer storytelling (Cao & Yan, 2020). Importantly, WeChat and Weibo are also instrumental in ideological and political education with universities embedding patriotic, moral, and policy themes into curated content—often through engaging formats such as artwork series or historical vignettes (Yang & Li, 2024). According to those studies, much of the content on these domestic platforms is localized, focusing on institutional announcements, campus events, student achievements, and ideological campaigns. While such content supports internal branding and political alignment, it rarely engages broader narratives of internationalization or world-class status. The domestically oriented strategies also emphasize national identity, political loyalty, and institutional harmony, often framed through top-down narratives.

In contrast, in the current study, I reveal how Chinese universities use an international social media platform to prioritize global visibility and reputational enhancement. Unlike the top-down, compliance-driven messaging on domestic platforms, my study will look at how Chinese universities use X/Twitter to craft an aspirational identity that appeals to international audiences. Therefore, my dissertation contributes to a deeper understanding of how Chinese

higher education institutions perform digital diplomacy, negotiate geopolitical contradictions, and construct layered institutional identities across multiple publics. My study not only extends current literature on Chinese universities' social media use by shifting the analytical lens to transnational platforms but also reveals how Chinese universities strategically differentiate their representations based on audience orientation and geopolitical positioning.

The current literature on social media in higher education marketing and engagement demonstrates a robust focus on Western universities, providing insights into information gathering, relationship building, and the impact on global university rankings. However, a notable weakness lies in the limited attention to non-Western universities. Among research focused on social media use in non-Western contexts, the primary focus of the research is its marketing purpose. The current literature has not studied the institutions' social media representation through a cultural studies approach and from a lens of world-class university initiatives. Although some studies have investigated Chinese universities' use of domestic social media platforms, there remains a notable gap in examining their use of global social media platforms to target international audiences. This gap becomes especially crucial as the global influence of Chinese universities expands, making it significant to understand their distinct approaches in engaging with prospective students and the wider international community. By examining how these universities utilize English-language social media platforms for marketing and engagement, my current research will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of global higher education dynamics represented on social media. My study will shed light on how Chinese institutions' efforts on representing themselves as world-class universities and connecting with an international audience.

## **X/Twitter in Higher Education**

My current study will primarily investigate qualitative data to be collected from four C9 Chinese universities' X/Twitter accounts. Therefore, I provide a literature review on how X/Twitter has been studied in the context of higher education is essential to establish the groundwork for this research. Examination of X/Twitter within higher education closely aligns with the broader literature on social media in higher education, where X/Twitter often serves as a focal point in empirical investigations. Given that X/Twitter serves as the starting point of this study, through this section of the literature review, I aim to provide readers with insights into the existing research on X/Twitter in higher education. I will delineate the trends, methodologies, and findings, while also highlighting the gap that will be explored in my current study.

### ***X/Twitter for Teaching and Learning***

Similar to the field of social media in higher education, most of the studies related to X/Twitter in higher education is the role X/Twitter plays in teaching and learning. Those literature focus on investigating students' learning experiences, instructor credibility, and academic performance by using X/Twitter.

The impact of X/Twitter on student engagement and learning is a central theme. Much literature there is more research demonstrated the benefits of using X/Twitter in teaching and learning. Kunka (2020) revealed how X/Twitter can increase student engagement in classrooms which contribute to students' academic success. DeGroot et al. (2015) demonstrated that faculty's use of X/Twitter could enhance student perceptions of instructor credibility and improve the educational experience. Similarly, Dommett (2019) highlighted how some undergraduate students use X/Twitter to support independent learning. Specifically, X/Twitter offers information on news media and provides a forum to support peer discussion. However,

Llausàs (2023) cautioned against exaggerating its benefits and suggested that universities should not magnify the benefits of using X/Twitter for education.

Another theme surrounds X/Twitter as a pedagogical tool. Bista's (2015) study suggested that X/Twitter is helpful for graduate students to receive immediate course information, ask questions, and share information with their classmates and instructor. Similar research conducted by Htay et al (2020) also showed that postgraduate students mainly use X/Twitter for social communications, and they believe that using X/Twitter for their learning is beneficial. But there are also concerns such as privacy concerns, unfamiliarity of the platform, and the 140-character limit. At undergraduate level, Erhel et al. (2022) demonstrated that the use of a X/Twitter-based instructional method can improve student motivation and academic outcomes. Similarly, Gleasono and Manca's study (2020) advocated the use of X/Twitter for higher education curriculum and instruction because the use of X/Twitter can increase student participation, help conceptual understanding, and increase interaction.

The predominant focus of the current research on X/Twitter for teaching and learning by faculty and students in higher education classrooms. However, my study is going to study how higher education institutions use X/Twitter to represent their faculty's teaching and students' learning. Understanding how Chinese universities showcase their world-class education on X/Twitter is crucial for comprehending the broader implications of social media in Chinese and global higher education.

### ***Institutional Use of X/Twitter***

The institutional use of X/Twitter is highly connected with the current study but literature in this area is still underdeveloped. In the following literature, I summarize how universities, particularly those in the West, used X/Twitter for marketing and communication. While some

institutions use X/Twitter strategically to engage with stakeholders and conveyed positive messages, there remains a need for more dialogic interactions and a deeper understanding of the factors shaping communication networks within the higher education sector.

The first theme centers on X/Twitter's role as a communication tool for higher education institutions. Shields (2016) studied communication between globally ranked universities on X/Twitter by using social network analysis and network models to examine these universities' interaction on X/Twitter. The study particularly examined whether universities "that occupy the top spaces in global rankings tend to associate with one another as a way of reproducing status" (p. 254). The study collected data from 211 world universities' X/Twitter accounts based on prominent global university rankings including the Big Three and US News and World Reports' "Top World Universities". Through analyzing X/Twitter data including followers, hashtags, and mentions, the results showed that Twitter communications are significantly related to global university rankings while the size of this effect is small. Instead of focusing on status competition, the X/Twitter communications concern more about geographic and structural factors such as reciprocal and transitive ties. This study revealed the need to critically reassess the meaning of world-class universities and the roles that global university rankings play in global higher education. Transitioning to a related investigation, Jordan (2017) studied the communications between U.K. higher education sectors through institutional X/Twitter accounts. Using a social network analysis-based approach involves collecting X/Twitter data from institutional accounts, creating a network analysis, and incorporating geolocation and university ranking data, the study revealed that prestige and geographic location play important roles in the structure of the network. Specifically, universities that have a higher ranking are in positions of greater control over the flow of information within the network and geographically close



institutions are frequently mentioned together in local events. Jordan's study recognized the potential impact of other factors influencing institutional X/Twitter account usage and suggests the importance of further investigations into the multifaceted nature of social media dynamics within the higher education sector. Expanding the exploration into another international context, Sörensen et al.'s (2023) study focused on how higher education institutions in Switzerland used social media to communicate with its stakeholders. Their study employed a cross-platform study by looking at 42 Swiss universities' Facebook, Instagram, and X/Twitter accounts over 18-year period. The methods involve the use of CrowdTangle and the X/Twitter API for data collection, employing measurements such as adoption patterns, intensity of use, engagement metrics, hypertextuality, and multimodality. They found that the adoption rates of social media platforms among Swiss universities align with international trends, but with some variations – specifically, higher education communication increased on Instagram but not on Facebook or X/Twitter, and X/Twitter was used the most by research-intensive universities. Their data also showed that there was no significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on universities' posting activities on social media. The findings suggested that Swiss universities' use social media as a complementary channel rather than a mere extension of traditional communication formats, with a strong focus on organizational matters and teaching topics. Sörensen et al.'s study demonstrated the need for further research to explore the intricate interplay between social media platforms and communication among higher education institutions.

The second theme pertains to the dialogical versus monologic use of X/Twitter by higher education institutions. By undertaking a content analysis guided by the principles of dialogic communication, Linvill et al. (2012) explored how higher education institutions in the U.S. selected from U.S. News and World Report including 60 national universities and 53 liberal arts

colleges use X/Twitter. The 113 institutions were chosen based on their rankings, and the ten most recent tweets were sampled for each institution. Coding, conducted by two authors, included identifying target audiences and determining the presence of dialogic principles. They found that universities use X/Twitter as an institutional news feed to a general population and more than half of the tweets analyzed contained links to outside sources. They argued that the way institutions use X/Twitter are not dialogic, but they suggest universities use the function of X/Twitter in a dialogical manner. Building upon this theme, Kimmons (2017) also studied the institutional use of X/Twitter in U.S. higher education by employing data mining and quantitative methods to analyze a substantial dataset comprising 5.7 million tweets from 2,411 higher education institutions. The findings revealed that “the preponderance of tweets a) are monologic, b) disseminate information, c) link to a relatively limited and insular ecosystem of web resources, and d) express neutral or positive sentiment” (p. 109). Those Tweets convey overwhelmingly positive representation on the university, faculty, and environment. Notably, the study challenged the prevailing narrative suggesting that X/Twitter could foster dialogic communication and community engagement within the higher education sector. While affirming findings from prior research, the study emphasized the need for academic administrators to develop processes that leverage social media more effectively to engage stakeholders.

Although much of the existing research on the use of X/Twitter in higher education has focused on Western contexts, a recent study by Pérez-Bonaventura et al. (2025), one of the first to examine university social media as a marketing tool in the Middle Eastern region, offers valuable insights. The study, which analyzed social media use in 14 universities across the United Arab Emirates, highlights the impact of both the frequency and quality of social media posts on audience engagement. Specifically, the authors found that universities on X/Twitter

with more frequent posts experienced higher levels of interaction, including more followers, likes, and reactions. Additionally, the study revealed a correlation between the number of posts on X/Twitter, higher university rankings, and increased student enrollments.

While existing literature examined how universities, especially in the West, used X/Twitter for communication, there is a notable gap in understanding the institutions' use of X/Twitter for representation. My current study that will investigate the representation of Chinese top universities on X/Twitter will become imperative due to the current gap in the literature on institutional X/Twitter use. While existing research provides insights into how Western universities communicate on X/Twitter and the structural factors influencing their interactions, there is a dearth of knowledge regarding the unique strategies employed by Chinese top universities on this platform. Studying how these institutions represent themselves on X/Twitter is crucial for gaining a comprehensive understanding of Chinese universities' dynamic branding efforts in global higher education competition. My current study will examine the representation of Chinese universities on X/Twitter, shedding light on how Chinese universities strategically shape their image as world-class universities on social media platforms.

## **Conclusion**

In this literature review, I have reviewed major theoretical and empirical work around three distinct yet interconnected themes: internationalization of higher education in China and the emergence of world-class universities in China, the utilization of social media within higher education, and the specific use of X/Twitter as a communication tool in higher education. Through the review process, I have identified an important gap in the existing research, one that presents a compelling opportunity for future inquiry.

World-class universities in China have become a subject of considerable interest and

research in recent years. There are a plethora of studies looking at policies, the impact of world-class university initiatives, and higher education stakeholder's perspectives on the initiatives. However, aside from Bae et al., (2023), Estera and Shahjahan (2019), Liang and Stack (2022), Shahjahan, et al. (2021), and Shahjahan, et al. (2022), there is a lack of research that examines higher education sector's representation from a cultural studies approach. Simultaneously, the rise of social media platforms and their integration into higher education has been another noteworthy focus of study. The specific use of X/Twitter in higher education has garnered its attention, particularly in Western contexts. While extensive research explores how Western universities and a few of non-Western universities utilize social media for marketing, there is a notable gap in understanding the use of social media by Chinese universities to represent their world-class status. Despite the widespread adoption of media strategies in higher education globally, the specific influence of social media on shaping the representation of Chinese universities, particularly within the elite C9 League remains unexplored.

The notable gap in the literature pertains to how world-class Chinese universities utilize X/Twitter. While there is a wealth of research on higher education in China and social media usage in Western universities, there is a scarcity of studies that specifically investigate how world-class Chinese universities employ X/Twitter for communication and engagement. This gap offers an exciting opportunity for scholars to delve into this research area and contribute to the understanding of global higher education in the digital age.

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, I detail the methodology employed in this study. I first introduce the research paradigm including my ontological, epistemological, and axiological positions as the researcher of this study. After that, I outline my research design including the specific process of data collection, selection and analysis. Next, I present a theoretical framework section to illustrate how the theories and approaches are integrated to guide my social media data analysis. Finally, I address the limitations of the current study from a methodological perspective.

#### **Research Paradigm**

Research paradigm describes the researcher's worldview or a particular way of seeing the world (Coe, 2017). As Coe (2017) suggested, being clear about the fundamental philosophical issues of ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (how we can know about reality), and axiology (the different values) is a prerequisite to conducting any kind of research and the philosophical position the researcher adopts determine the methods to be used. Therefore, it is important for me, as the researcher of this study, to share the research paradigm I employ in this study because the paradigm informs the research process and shapes my understanding of knowledge and approach to methodology and interpretation of qualitative data.

First, ontology refers to "what is the nature or form of the social world?" (Waring, 2017, p. 62). As a social science researcher, I hold the ontological position of constructivism. The constructivist paradigm in research is grounded in the belief that knowledge is actively constructed by individuals through their interactions with the world, rather than passively received. Rooted in philosophical perspectives such as phenomenology and hermeneutics, constructivism emphasizes the subjective nature of reality and the importance of understanding the unique perspectives and interpretations of individuals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this

paradigm, researchers acknowledge the role of the researcher in shaping the research process and recognize that knowledge is context dependent. As Guba and Lincoln (1989) asserted, constructivism is characterized by a focus on understanding the meaning individuals attribute to their experiences and the socially constructed nature of reality. Researchers employing the constructivist paradigm often utilize qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and participant observation, to explore and interpret the rich, context-specific meanings embedded in qualitative data collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Second, epistemology asks, “how can what is assumed to exist to be known?” (Waring, 2017, p. 62). Because I approach this study from a constructivist ontology, my epistemological position is interpretivism. Interpretivism, as an ontological stance in research, is grounded in the belief that reality is subjective and socially constructed, emphasizing the importance of understanding the meanings individuals assign to their experiences. This ontological perspective rejects the notion of an objective, external reality and posits that individuals actively shape and interpret their world through their interactions and experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In interpretivism, researchers recognize that knowledge is context-dependent and seek to uncover the subjective meanings and interpretations that individuals attribute to phenomena. As Waring (2017) noted, “interpretivism does not see direct knowledge as possible; it is the accounts and observations of the world that provide indirect indications of phenomena, and thus knowledge is developed through a process of interpretation” (p. 62). This approach aligns with the idea that reality is not fixed but is rather a product of the social and cultural contexts in which individuals are situated. The ontological underpinnings of interpretivism advocate for a qualitative research paradigm that employs methods such as interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to explore and understand the diverse perspectives and interpretations of qualitative data

(Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Finally, axiology deals with the values and ethics of the study and it asks what values are going to guide my research process (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The axiology of my study is embedded within a constructivist paradigm, given the focus on interpreting and understanding the values associated with the representation of top Chinese universities on X/Twitter. A constructivist axiology aligns with the belief that values and meanings are socially constructed and context dependent. My study aims to unpack the dynamics of social media usage by Chinese universities, emphasizing the constructed nature of media representations and the fluidity of meaning in the context of global higher education. The emphasis on examining how narratives and images contribute to the concept of a world-class Chinese university suggests an interest in the subjective interpretation of these representations. Additionally, the goal of my study is to critically evaluate whether the representations perpetuate and reproduce certain powers and values, which further supporting the notion of a constructivist axiological stance. The emphasis on discussing how the notion of world-class university is depicted in the Chinese context on social media also suggests an appreciation for diverse cultural values and contexts in shaping the identity of modern universities in a globalized world.

## **Cultural Studies**

In the previous chapters, I have mentioned that I will use a cultural studies approach to examine top Chinese universities' representation on X/Twitter. In this section, I detail cultural studies for understanding the complex interrelations between culture, power, and society, and its focus on how cultural practices are tied to power structures and societal norms. I also discuss why cultural studies is a powerful approach to study social media representation and introduce some important concepts including ideology, representation, identification and signifying

practice in cultural studies that will later be applied in the data analysis process.

According to Simon During (2007), cultural studies is the study of culture, and more specifically, contemporary culture. When discussing culture, a founder of cultural studies in Britain, Raymond Williams (1983) identified culture as a complex term, which can be viewed as an ideal, as a documentary record, or as a social practice. Williams (1958) expanded the concept of culture to include not only arts and learning but also the ordinary behavior and institutions, framing it as a “whole way of life” (Williams, 1958). Culture profoundly influences people’s perceptions of human beings and society, and cultural studies explores the cultural dimensions across a variety of topics such as youth, race, class, nation, gender, consumption, everyday life, popular media, and the environment (Hall, 1997a; During, 2007). Thus, culture studies provides researchers with tools to analyze cultural practices, representations, identities and power.

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines the ways in which culture creates and transforms individual experiences, everyday life, social relations, and power. Developed from the works of Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, cultural studies incorporates various perspectives from sociology, anthropology, political science, and media studies (Hall, 1980; Williams, 1983). Cultural studies focuses on the analysis of cultural practices and their relations to power. Unlike traditional approaches that emphasize high culture (like literature and fine arts), cultural studies concerns itself with popular culture and everyday life. Therefore, popular culture is widely favored and is a mass and commercial culture for ordinary people (Wright, 2018). Stuart Hall also argued that popular culture is a site of “negotiation” and “struggle,” where meanings are created, dispersed, and contested (Hall, 1980). This perspective allows researchers to consider the wide array of cultural expressions and their impact on societal norms and individual identities.



Social media platforms like Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have transformed how culture is produced and consumed. These platforms not only allow users to share content but also to interact with it, thereby participating in the co-creation of cultural norms and values (Jenkins, 2006). Cultural studies provides a rich theoretical framework that can be applied to the complex and dynamic environment of social media. By focusing on how cultural meanings are created, disseminated and contested through social media, researchers can gain insights into contemporary cultural dynamics and power relations (Van Dijck, 2013). This approach is particularly relevant in an era where social media platforms play a pivotal role in shaping cultural norms and identities (Marwick, 2013). As such, cultural studies not only enriches our understanding of social media but also helps us grasp the broader cultural transformations that are taking place in the digital age.

Social media is a powerful case to study because media images shape people's view of the world, values, behaviors, and identities, and "media spectacles demonstrate who has power and who is powerless" (Kellner, 2021, p. 7). In the case of top Chinese universities' social media representation, it helps shape audiences' understanding of the meaning of a world-class Chinese university. Cultural studies "provides some tools that enable individuals to read and interpret culture critically." (Kellner, 2021, p. 8), so it helps me, as the researcher, to investigate how these universities use social media to articulate what world-class universities look like in China. The identity of world-class universities, from the perspective of cultural studies is a dominant ideology—a set of beliefs, values, and ideas that are widely shared by members of a society—which serves to "reproduce social relations of domination and subordination." (Kellner, 2021, p. 9). Therefore, the cultural studies approach helps me to examine the social media representations of world-class Chinese universities and raise critiques of the ideology of world-class universities

that reproduce certain forms of biases against members of subordinate institutions, their education, students, or alternative lifestyles (Kellner, 2021). Nevertheless, popular culture is also a site that provides “possibilities for both reproduction of social inequalities and oppression, and opposition to them.” (Wright, 2018, p. 973). Therefore, cultural studies will help me to advocate for a nuanced and pluralistic reimagining of the idea of world-class universities.

The theoretical foundation of my analysis of the research data will be grounded in Stuart Hall’s (1997a, 1997b) concept of representation. Hall (1997a) argued that representation is constitutive of meaning. In other words, meanings are inherently dubious and that no social event acquires a definitive, unchanging, or absolute meaning until it is represented. In Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding model (which examines the dynamics of communication, specifically how media messages are crafted by producers and interpreted by audiences), Hall (1980) challenged the notion that audiences passively absorb information. Instead, people actively decode and interpret media content, influenced by their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds. However, the meanings produced by readers or viewers would never be the same as the writers or image makers as well as other readers or viewers (Esteria & Shahjahan, 2019; Shahjahan et al. 2020). This interaction plays a crucial role in the circulation of meaning within a society (Hall, 1980). Therefore, in my analysis of images tweeted by Chinese universities, I will focus on my understanding of the images rather than speculating the intentions of the image makers.

Another concept of Hall’s (1997b) I will draw on for my data analysis is “identification”, especially in the analysis in the Chapter 5. My current study particularly explores how Chinese universities assume their audience and identify with what is to be depicted on social media. By studying media discourses, researchers can uncover how societal narratives around race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class are constructed and what impacts they have on individual and

collective identity. This investigation helps illuminate the complex ways in which media representations contribute to and challenge existing power structures (Hall, 1997a). According to Hall (1997b), advertising works are attempting to win identification, and identification “is the degree to which ... [one] can project [itself] into the image” (p. 16). By saying that, in the visual data analysis process, I will make meaning of top Chinese universities’ visual representation on X/Twitter as a way for identity claim, promoting and legitimizing themselves as world-class universities in a common sense shaped by the social imaginary. During the data analysis process, I will ask questions including how the images tweeted by Chinese universities striving to win the identification of the world-class status? Who and what benefits from the image representation of the world-class Chinese university (Hall, 1997b, Estera & Shahjahan, 2019; Shahjahan et al. 2020)?

In addition to analyzing the social media contents, my study also focusses on investigating how these contents are disseminated. To address my research question of how top Chinese universities represent themselves on X/Twitter, my analysis focuses on examining the signifying practices – the processes through which meaning is constructed and communicated using signs, symbols, language, and cultural practices (Hall, 1997a). Signifying practices encompass the deliberate use of visual and textual elements to convey specific identities, ideologies, and narratives such as the universities’ world-class status and China’s national identity in this study. By analyzing how Chinese universities employ these practices on X/Twitter, I explore how they construct and project their identities as world-class institutions. This includes examining the strategic use of imagery, hashtags, language, and cultural references to create meaning, appeal to global audiences, and shape their representation in the global higher education landscape.

In the following sections, I discuss my research design, including the specific methods I used to answer the primary research question: How do top Chinese universities represent themselves on X/Twitter? I introduce the four universities being studied in this research, the process of data collection and selection, the steps for data analysis, the theoretical framework and the limitations of the study.

#### **Four C9 Universities**

Among all C9 universities, THU, PKU, ZJU and SJTU are active on X/Twitter, the rest of them either do not have an X/Twitter account or do not tweet regularly. The four C9 universities have studied in this research are the most prestigious universities in China based in urban centers, and they are all “Double First Class” universities and were elite institutions in the 985 Project (Allen, 2017). All these four universities are ranked top 50 globally by major global university rankers and are located in China’s most economically developed regions. They receive significant government funding and are most research-intensive institutions, and they also have many international partnerships with prestigious universities in around the world (Allen, 2017). In the following sections, I introduce these four universities to provide some of the backgrounds of these most prestigious Chinese universities. I also present the key information of these four universities in Table 1.

#### ***Tsinghua University***

Founded in 1911, Tsinghua University valued the interaction of Chinese and Western cultures, ancient and modern knowledge, as well as humanities and sciences. Following the nationwide restructuring of universities and colleges after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, it became a polytechnic institute with a focus on engineering. Upholding the motto of "Self-discipline and Social Commitment" and the spirit of "Actions Speak Louder Than

Words," Tsinghua University is devoted to improving the well-being of Chinese society and contributing to global development. As one of China's highly esteemed and influential universities, Tsinghua is committed to nurturing global citizens who can thrive in the modern world and become future leaders. Through the pursuit of excellence in education and research, Tsinghua is developing innovative solutions to address pressing challenges in China and the world (Tsinghua University, 2020).

In 2021, there were about 3,424 international students from 130 countries studying at THU, and 3,235 of them were enrolled in degree programs (1,056 undergraduates, 1,723 master's students, and 456 doctoral students). There are more than 30,000 Tsinghua international alumni worldwide (Tsinghua University Admissions, n.d.). THU has partnerships with over 290 universities and institutions and has established more than 100 exchange programs and 50 dual and double degree programs with other world-class universities (Tsinghua University, n.d.-a).

THU released its Global Strategy 2030 in 2021. The Global Strategy aims to “enhance its level of international exchange and cooperation to higher standards, and contribute to building a community with a shared future for mankind.” (Tsinghua University, n.d.-b). The Global Strategy shows THU's ambition to expand its influence worldwide, and THU has established research centers across the globe such as Tsinghua University Latin America Center, China-Africa Leadership Development Institute, Tsinghua Southeast Asia Center, and China-Italy Design Innovation Hub.

THU has a variety of social media accounts, including WeChat, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, TikTok, and THU joined X/Twitter in November 2015, and has 13.3K posts and 784.8K followers by April 21, 2024 (Tsinghua University, n.d.-c).

## ***Peking University***

Peking University, which was originally known as the Imperial University of Peking and established in 1898, was China's first comprehensive university and the primary education authority during that time. The university has a reputation for producing top-tier and innovative students, being a significant contributor to cutting-edge scientific and knowledge advancement and serving as a crucial platform for international exchange. Peking University remains at the forefront of global academic research and is committed to cultivating future leaders who will shape the world. By enhancing its international education system, the university continues to nurture exceptional talents for the benefit of society worldwide (Peking University, n.d.-a).

According to Peking University's Office of International Relations, in December 2019, there were approximately 6,857 international students from 116 countries at PKU, and 2,783 of them were enrolled in degree programs (Peking University International Students Division, n.d.). PKU has global partnership with nearly 500 universities and research institutions in more than 60 countries and regions. PKU released "Global Excellence Strategy" in 2019. (PKU News, 2019, June 18). This international blueprint "aims to enhance international exchanges and cooperation, overcome development barriers, gather high-quality resources and stimulate collegial progress." In the "Global Excellence Strategy", it particularly emphasizes the ambition to build a world-class institution and to shape the international development dynamic (PKU News, 2019, June 18).

At PKU, the Office of Global Communications that established in April 2019 serves as a channel to connect PKU with other institutions around the world through various social media platforms and other communications channels (Peking University, n.d.-b). PKU's X/Twitter account was launched in April 2018 and has become a vital platform for international audiences to learn about PKU. It plays a significant role in enhancing PKU's global partnerships and

maintaining its global reputation (PKU Office of Publicity/New & Media Center, 2022, July 8). PKU's X/Twitter accounts has 8670 posts and 687.3K followers by April 21, 2024.

### ***Shanghai Jiao Tong University***

Founded in 1896 with the objective of training professionals for the country, Shanghai Jiao Tong University has become a top 100 global university. SJTU prioritizes educational internationalization, bolstering its comprehensive strengths and global influence. Through an internationalization strategy, a new development plan, overseas centers, strategic partnerships, and exchange programs, SJTU is striving to become a world-class university. SJTU excels in scientific research and technological innovation, leading China in the number of projects and funds received from the National Natural Science Foundation for 12 consecutive years. SJTU encourages global talent and is committed to preserving cultural heritage and invigorating the Chinese nation and all humankind. With a centennial history, SJTU is working towards becoming a comprehensive, innovative, and internationalized world-class university that belongs not just to China, but to the world (Shanghai Jiao Tong University, 2021).

SJTU currently has 5040 international students and more than 150 global partners. SJTU has an impressive record track of developing international joint programs. SJTU has established three joint institutes, which are SJTU China-Europe International Business School, the University of Michigan – Shanghai Jiao Tong University Joint Institute, and SJTU Paris Elite Institute of Technology. SJTU also established numerous Joint programs such as the UBC international MBA Program (with Canada), NUS-SJTU MSc in Quantitative Finance (with Singapore), and SJTU – UoM Doctoral Management Program (with the U.K.) (Shanghai Jiao Tong University International Affairs Division, n.d.)

SJTU joined X/Twitter in April 2019, and has 2620 posts and 10.1K followers by April

21, 2024.

### ***Zhejiang University***

Zhejiang University is a top-tier higher education institution in China, established in 1897 as the Qiushi Academy. ZJU currently ranks among the top three in mainland China and within the top 100 in global university rankings. The University values innovation and entrepreneurship and its researchers are focused on addressing global challenges. ZJU is committed to transforming China and the world through active engagement, including creating a platform for intellectual property exchange and forming think-tanks. ZJU's goal is to become a world-class university with a distinctively Chinese character, integrating tradition and modernity (Zhejiang University, n.d.).

ZJU launched its first-ever global ZJU strategy in 2018, and then introduced Global ZJU 2.0 which lifted the university's sights and aim far higher. Their global strategy aims to “deliver gold-standard education to nature globally competent and competitive students”, “deepen international research collaborations”, “recruit and retain the most talented faculty”, “advance a broad range of meaningful, multilayer global partnerships”, and “foster the ecosystems where a global dimension will be truly embedded” (Zhejiang University, 2023b).

ZJU has more than 200 global partner universities and more than 600 global study programs (Zhejiang University, 2023a). ZJU has also launched an international campus in 2016. There are 2 joint institutes within the international campus, namely, ZJU-UoE Institute (partnering with the University of Edinburgh, ZJU-UIUC Institute (partnering with the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign). There are 5,123 international students at ZJU from over 150 countries (Zhejiang University, 2023c).

ZJU joined X/Twitter in April 2017 and has 2719 posts and 53.8K followers by April 21,



2024.

**Table 1**

*Four C9 Universities*

University	Year Established	Key Characteristics	Internationalization	Social Media Presence
Tsinghua University (THU)	1911	Focuses on blending Chinese and Western cultures, humanities, and sciences; emphasizes global citizenship and innovation.	Partnerships with over 290 institutions, 100+ exchange programs, and research centers worldwide; Global Strategy 2030 launched.	Joined X/Twitter in Nov 2015; 13.3K posts; 784.8K followers (April 2024).
Peking University (PKU)	1898	China's first comprehensive university; known for innovative education and cutting-edge research; aims to cultivate future global leaders.	Partnerships with nearly 500 institutions globally; released "Global Excellence Strategy" in 2019.	Joined X/Twitter in Apr 2018; 8,670 posts; 687.3K followers (April 2024).
Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU)	1896	Emphasizes educational internationalization, technological innovation, and cultural heritage preservation.	Partnerships with 150+ institutions; joint programs and institutes with leading global universities.	Joined X/Twitter in Apr 2019; 2,620 posts; 10.1K followers (April 2024).
Zhejiang University (ZJU)	1897	Values innovation, entrepreneurship, and addressing global challenges; aims to integrate tradition and modernity.	Over 200 partner universities; Global ZJU 2.0 strategy; international campus with joint institutes.	Joined X/Twitter in Apr 2017; 2,719 posts; 53.8K followers (April 2024).

### **Data Collection, Selection and Justification**

To answer the research question, I primarily collected data from Peking University, Tsinghua University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Zhejiang University's X/Twitter

accounts. In pursuit of a robust approach to data collection and selection, I employed a systematic methodology to ensure the validity and relevance of the study. In this section, I outline the data collection and selection process, along with the justifications for specific decisions made in this context.

Although constructivist researchers frequently employ a purposive sampling technique, in order to have a comprehensive understanding of top Chinese universities' X/Twitter representation, I prioritized maximal data retrieval in the initial round of data collection. To assemble a comprehensive dataset that would accurately reflect the current values and identities of the universities under investigation, For PKU, SJTU and ZJU, I collected tweets from these three universities in a 3-month period, from December 1, 2023, to February 29, 2024. For THU, I collected tweets from February 23 to March 27 because, at the time of data collection, I was unable to retrieve tweets prior to February 23 due to THU's high posting frequency and the retrieval limit. So overall, all the data were collected between December and March 2024. In total, I collected 658 tweets: 116 from ZJU, 137 from SJTU, 152 from THU, and 253 from PKU.

The dataset is substantial and served as the foundation for the subsequent analysis. The data collection was completed in May 2024 after the defense of the dissertation proposal. Although the dissertation is expected to be defended in April 2025, the year of 2023 and 2024 still ensure that the dataset is contemporaneous and reflective of the most recent online activities of the selected universities. The large number of data collected can also contribute to data saturation.

I intentionally collected tweets from December 2023 to March 2024, as the focal point of the analysis is strategically grounded in the dynamics of university communication and international engagement on X/Twitter. This period encapsulates several key events and

transitions that are pertinent to understanding how Chinese universities represent themselves to an international audience. First, this period coincides with a crucial phase of international student recruitment for universities worldwide. During this time, prospective international students are actively researching and considering their options for studying abroad. Chinese universities, like their counterparts globally, intensify their efforts to attract and engage with these prospective students through various channels, including social media platforms like X/Twitter. Second, the inclusion of Christmas and Lunar New Year within this timeframe adds another layer of significance. These cultural celebrations often prompt universities to tailor their messaging and engage with their international audience in ways that resonate with these festive occasions. It provides an opportunity to observe how universities incorporate cultural diversity and inclusivity into their communication strategies. Additionally, in China, January marks the end of the fall semester for many universities, while February typically heralds the beginning of the spring semester. These transitions signify periods of reflection, anticipation, and planning within university communities. Observing how Chinese universities communicate during these transitional phases can offer insights into their priorities, initiatives, and engagements with international stakeholders. By focusing the analysis on this period, I aim to capture the nuanced ways in which Chinese universities project their identities, communicate their strengths, and engage with international audiences during a critical juncture of international student recruitment and cultural significance. The total of 658 tweets should provide me with a sizable dataset for analysis without being overwhelmingly large. The 4-month period also allows me to capture a range of activities, events, and engagements that might occur throughout the year.

### **Multimodal Data Analysis**

As Beneito-Montagut (2019) notes, “Qualitative analysis of digital social data refers to

innovative strategies to make sense and interpret these kind of data” (p. 2), thus, the data analysis process of my study is to make meaning and interpret tweets collected. Beneito-Montagut (2019) also suggested that “multimodal research is a useful analytical framework to analyse social media data” and “In multimodal research, communication and representation is more than language, it refers to semiotic approaches as in the analysis of colour, shape, image, gestures, and gazes in communicative situations. It assumes that languages and their modes (written, oral, visual, gestural) attach meanings (semantic, symbolic, and affective) and are world- making” (pp. 2-3). Therefore, social media data provides rich resources to study social phenomena such as power, politics, and social relationships.

Before delving into data analysis, I systematically organized the collected tweets from each university into initial themes. I immersed myself in the data by reading and rereading the dataset, noted initial ideas and patterns of the dataset, and organized these data into the emerging themes. During this process, a variety of themes emerged, including the universities’ international engagement, global collaborations and partnerships, research achievements, exceptional students and faculty, picturesque campuses, vibrant campus life, student activities, and promotion of Chinese culture. To streamline the focus of my analysis, I consolidated these themes into three predominant and recurring themes for each finding chapter: (1) breakthrough research, (2) student engagement in China’s cultural diplomacy, and (3) the power of global alliances.

These themes were selected based on their prominence across the dataset and their relevance to the research question. Breakthrough research highlights the universities’ emphasis on innovation and global academic leadership. Student engagement in China’s cultural diplomacy reflects how universities practice China’s soft power strategy and demonstrate their

role in promoting international cultural connections. The power of global alliances demonstrates how global partnerships enhance academic opportunities and strengthen the universities' global influence and reputation. My analysis of each theme focused on three dimensions—faculty, students, and the institution—ensuring a comprehensive exploration of how these universities strategically use social media to construct their identities as world-class institutions. This thematic framework provided a targeted focus and captured the multifaceted strategies employed by these universities to position themselves within the global higher education landscape.

After deciding the major themes for analysis, I took an initial analysis for the tweets collected. I drew on the approach of thematic analysis for analyzing and reporting patterns inherent in the X/Twitter data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a well-established approach for unraveling underlying narratives and producing insights of social media data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This methodological choice allowed me to examine the content, enabling a rich, detailed, and nuanced understanding of the tweets (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). Specifically, I drew on Murthy's (2016) approach for analyzing the tweets. I conducted a "selective coding" for tweets in each theme, I looked at the topics of content and formats used such as texts and visuals (Murphy, 2016, p. 5; Shahjahan et al., 2021). For each tweet selected for analysis, I began by carefully reading the text of the tweet to understand its core message and observed the accompanying visual content to analyze its contribution to the overall narrative. I paid attention to the specific elements within the tweet, such as the use of hashtags, emojis, and stylistic choices, as these often play a role in engaging the audience and signaling themes. I also examined the central focus of the tweet—who or what it aimed to highlight—and considered how these elements were framed in relation to the university's branding as prestigious world-class Chinese universities. Additionally, I identified

patterns in the tweets, particularly whether certain themes, such as research, student engagement, or global partnerships, were associated with recurring formats, language styles, or visual designs. Taking examples from each university representing the themes, I wrote memos of thematic engagement and integration coding (Murthy, 2016). The inductive coding process allowed me to have an initial understanding of how each theme is represented by each university through tweets.

In the following sections, I introduce how CDA and visual analysis as part of the multimodal data analysis are being employed in the data analysis process. I also provide a table (Table 2) below showing the various modes of analysis I employed in this study.

**Table 2**

*Multimodal Data Analysis*

Stage	Focus	Data Elements Analyzed	Data Analysis Process	Purpose
Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke; Murthy)	Identify recurring patterns and themes	Tweet content (text, images and format)	Immersive reading, memo writing, inductive coding, theme consolidation	Organize data into key themes: research excellence, student engagement in cultural diplomacy and global alliances
Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough)	Examine power, ideology, and identity construction	Text from tweets	Apply Fairclough's three-dimensional framework; emphasized sociocultural analysis on the power dynamics, ideological stances, and cultural implications in the tweets	Understand ideological messaging and soft power strategies of Chinese universities

**Table 2 (cont'd)**

Visual Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen; Heinrich)	Interpret symbolic meaning and visual strategies	Images from tweets	Analyze viewpoint, lighting, foreground/background, emotional tone; identified symbolic meanings	Unpack how visuals construct institutional identity, global status, and affective appeal
Writing as Method of Inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre)	Integrate, reflect, and refine interpretations	Combined textual and visual analyses	Reorganize analysis thematically, connected discourse and visuals, engaged reflexively with data	Develop layered, cohesive finding sections that bridge modalities and deepens interpretation

***Critical Discourse Analysis***

After gaining an initial understanding of the dataset, I shifted my focus to analyzing the discourse embedded in the selected tweets, examining how language was strategically employed to convey and reinforce power dynamics. This deeper analysis allowed me to explore the ideological stances, social relationships, and institutional priorities reflected in the tweets, shedding light on how they construct and maintain power within the context of global higher education and China's soft power strategies.

My analysis of the texts of X/Twitter data relied on the analytic procedures of Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach helped examine language in connection with power and ideology. According to Fairclough (1995), the primary focus of research under CDA is discourse—"language use conceived as social practice" (p. 135). By studying discourse and its social relations, the analysis process aims to allow researchers to grasp how discourse (re)produces and challenges social power and dominance with the goal of

rectifying societal inequality from a socio-political standpoint (Van Dijck, 1993; Vavrus & Seghers, 2010). CDA, as an analytic tool, offered me a critical lens to explore the discourse represented on Chinese top universities' X/Twitter accounts and its social relations. This approach opens up possibilities to unpack "dominant ideological representations of reality that are naturalized as the only possible ways of seeing reality" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 65). Through this approach, the texts used on institutional X/Twitter accounts, perceived as representations of the institutions, were seen as by-products of ideological processes shaped by social power and dominance (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijck, 1993).

CDA from a cultural studies perspective involves examining the ways in which language and communication are used to construct, maintain, and challenge cultural and social power structures (Fairclough, 1995). Cultural studies, with its focus on understanding and interrogating the dynamics of culture, power, and ideology, provides a rich framework for conducting CDA (Hall, 1980). Specifically, my analysis centered on examining how language was used by Chinese universities' tweets to construct the meaning about the identity of a world-class Chinese university. Also, my analysis examined how power relations were enacted and reproduced through discourse. This included exploring how language reinforced or resisted power imbalances (Van Dijck, 2008; Foucault, 1972). By applying these steps, CDA from a cultural studies perspective allowed me to deeply analyze how texts and communications actively shaped societal norms, values, and power structures, thereby providing insights into the mechanisms of cultural influence and social imaginary (Appadurai, 1996).

Drawing on Bae et al.'s (2021) approach, I utilized Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework of analysis to examine each tweet, focusing on "three dimensions including analyses on the text (such as vocabulary and cohesion), "discourse practice (such as



production and distribution), and sociocultural analysis (such as relationship between practice and society) levels” (Bae et al., 2021, p. 148). In this sense, this analytic framework can be perceived as a method to examine language along with its sociocultural context (Fairclough, 1992, 1995). Specifically, my analysis process comprises three stages guided by Fairclough’s framework”. Nevertheless, I only presented the societal analysis in my finding chapters because it provided the most significant insights into the broader implications of the data in relation to my research questions and objectives. In my societal analysis, I situated the discourse within broader social and cultural contexts, focusing on the wider societal structures, power relations, and ideologies that shape and are shaped by discourse. This analysis explored how language and discourse contribute to the maintenance or transformation of power dynamics, social norms, and cultural values. I addressed questions of ideology and power, examining how specific ways of speaking or writing support or challenge societal structures. The societal analysis allowed me to focus on how the tweets contribute to the construction of China’s soft power, the representation of world-class status, and the alignment of these practices with global higher education narratives. By emphasizing the societal level, I centered the analysis on the power dynamics, ideological stances, and cultural implications embedded in the tweets, which were critical to understanding their role in shaping perceptions of Chinese universities in a global context. Furthermore, this focus enabled me to engage with the overarching themes of digital diplomacy and educational branding, which were central to my dissertation. The textual and discourse practice levels, while valuable, primarily serve as supporting layers that inform the sociocultural analysis, which is ultimately the most relevant for addressing my research aims.

### ***Visual Analysis***

After completing the CDA, my focus shifted to analyzing visual data. In doing so, I drew

on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) semiotic approach of visual grammar – “specific visual elements and structures carry particular meanings” (Shahjahan et al., 2020, p. 5) as well as Heinrich's (2017) photographic techniques. This method has been effectively utilized in prior studies, such as Estera & Shahjahan (2019) and Shahjahan et al. (2020), in analyzing visual data. In this study, I continued their approach to explore visual data tweeted by top Chinese universities. Specifically, I used the photographic techniques (viewpoint, foreground and background, lighting, and mood) to theorize the meaning of the visual data as a viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Heinrich, 2017).

I followed a systematic process to analyze each visual in the dataset. First, I conducted a viewpoint analysis, assessing the angle, distance, and direction of the image. This step considered how varying angles and distances conveyed power differentials and social distance, providing insight into the intended relationships between the subjects and the viewers. Next, I performed a foreground and background analysis, evaluating the elements emphasized in each part of the image. Objects positioned closer to the viewer were interpreted as carrying more prominence or significance within the visual narrative. I then analyzed the lighting in each image, examining both natural and artificial sources. This involved considering how lighting was used to draw attention to key elements and how it contributed to the overall mood of the visual. Following this, I interpreted the mood and emotion of each image, focusing on how the combination of techniques and content shaped the emotional resonance and the imagined worlds conveyed in the photograph's setting (Heinrich, 2017). This mood played a central role in understanding how the universities used visuals to construct a sense of identity and self-representation.

Building on these analyses, I drew inferences about the social imaginaries represented

within the visual data. I considered how visual elements and structures contributed to the construction of meaning and the portrayal of specific narratives or ideals. After analyzing the visuals, I reflected on broader questions prompted by the data, such as the construction of identity, power dynamics, and cultural representations within the images. My further analysis particularly focused on asking how do top Chinese universities' tweets visualize their world-class status? With whom are the images seeking identification? Whose desires are they seeking to construct, and how? These considerations provided a deeper understanding of how the visual elements contributed to the universities' strategies for global representation and identity construction.

### ***Writing as Method of Inquiry***

After completing the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, I employed “writing as a method of inquiry” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), an analytical approach that emphasizes the process of writing itself to organize and present my findings. This approach allowed me to engage with my data in a dynamic, reflective, and nuanced way. By integrating writing into the analytical process, I did not view it as a mere tool for reporting results but rather as an active and generative space that facilitated deeper exploration and understanding of how Chinese universities represent themselves on social media.

For each theme, I reorganized my discourse and visual analysis to integrate both textual and visual elements within the chapters. Although the analyses were conducted separately for discourse and visual content, my writing process drew on a structured framework that wove these elements together. Specifically, I used my societal analysis as the macro-level framework and primary argument for each theme, providing a broad contextual understanding. The textual and visual analyses then served as detailed examples and supportive evidence that reinforced the

main argument within each theme. This approach allowed for a dynamic and layered presentation of the findings, where societal analysis illuminated the ideological strategies and power relations employed by the universities to construct their public image, while the textual and visual analyses provided concrete illustrations of these representations. By integrating these steps, I presented a comprehensive understanding of how top Chinese universities represent themselves on social media and how the global identities they constructed shape and fix the meaning of a world-class Chinese university.

The integration of visual and textual analysis was not merely a juxtaposition of two distinct types of data but rather a deliberate attempt to create a synergistic narrative. Writing as a method of inquiry enabled me to connect the visual and textual elements in a way that enhanced their individual contributions to the analysis. For instance, when analyzing a visual representation alongside its accompanying text, I used writing to draw connections between the ideological messages conveyed through both modes and to explore how they worked together to construct the universities' representation. The writing process thus acted as a bridge, linking the two forms of analysis and enabling a more comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of the data.

Writing not only served to present findings but also as an integral part of the data analysis process itself. As I wrote, I engaged in a continuous dialogue with the data, which allowed me to refine my understanding, challenge initial interpretations, and discover new connections that might not have been apparent in earlier stages. This iterative process of writing as inquiry enabled me to approach my data with a critical and reflective mindset, ensuring that the analysis remained flexible and responsive to the complexities of the data.

Throughout this process, I remained mindful of my own positionality as a researcher and how it shaped both the writing and analytical processes. Writing, as a method of inquiry, was

inherently reflexive, and I made a conscious effort to acknowledge the ways in which my personal and academic experiences, as well as my cultural background, informed the way I interpreted and presented the data. This reflexivity ensured that my analysis remained critical and self-aware, recognizing the potential for bias while also embracing the subjectivity inherent in the researcher's role.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Kivunja (2018), a theoretical framework comprises concepts and theories that help researchers to have a scholarly foundation for the analysis and interpretation of the meaning contained in the research data. In previous sections, I have introduced cultural studies, particularly Hall's theory of representation, Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis as well as visual grammars and photographic techniques that I employed in my data analysis. In this section I outline how these theories and approaches are synthesized into a cohesive theoretical framework to guide my analysis of the social media data. I also provide a figure (Figure 1) to visualize how this multi-layered framework guided my analysis of X/Twitter data by focusing on the dynamic ways in which meanings are constructed and circulated.

I created the figure that aims to visualize how the theoretical framework manifests across my three finding chapters, and how each of the subsequent finding chapters manifest this framework. Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework guiding this study, which integrates Hall's representation theory and Fairclough's CDA through the methodological lens of visual grammar and photographic techniques. This framework is applied to analyze how top Chinese universities utilize X/Twitter to construct their institutional identities and engage in global conversations. The data, drawn from tweets that combine textual and visual elements, was systematically analyzed across three key findings chapters: breakthrough research (Chapter 4),

student engagement and cultural diplomacy (Chapter 5), and global alliances (Chapter 6). Central to this analysis is the methodological bridge of visual grammar and photographic techniques,



**Figure 1: Theoretical Framework**

which emphasize the interplay of viewpoint, foreground and background, lighting, and mood.

These elements shape the narrative conveyed in the tweets and reflect the strategic use of

Fairclough's concepts of power and discourse as well as Hall's emphasis on representation and identification. Furthermore, X/Twitter's architectural features, such as hashtags, emojis, and the rapid dissemination of content, are key to amplifying these representations, enabling these universities to influence global perceptions of China's higher education system. Together, this framework not only reveals how top Chinese universities construct their institutional identities but also how these identities contribute to broader ideological and discursive constructions of China's role in global higher education.

By integrating Hall's representation theory, Fairclough's CDA, and visual analysis, my current study systematically examined how top Chinese universities construct and communicate their world-class identities on X/Twitter. Hall's theory provided the foundation for understanding how meaning is actively produced through representation, revealing how universities use specific linguistic and visual signifiers to frame their global status. CDA complemented this by situating these discourses within broader ideological and power structures, uncovering how universities strategically align with dominant global narratives while simultaneously extending China's soft power into existing academic hierarchies. Finally, visual analysis illuminated the aesthetic and compositional choices that shape how these representations are perceived, demonstrating how visual elements work alongside textual discourse to signify institutional excellence, global engagement, and cultural positioning. Together, these three components allowed for a multidimensional and multimodal analysis that captures the dynamic interplay between discourse, power, and visual meaning, demonstrating how Chinese universities use social media to navigate and reshape their position in the global higher education landscape.

Hall's representation theory served as the foundational framework for my data analysis, providing a lens to examine how meaning is actively constructed rather than passively reflected.

My data analysis directly manifested Hall's theory by revealing how universities use representation to produce and circulate specific meanings. Through the analysis of hashtags, emojis, visuals, and textual narratives, I identified the active role of social media in amplifying and stabilizing these representations. By applying Hall's concepts of representation and identification, my analysis showed how top Chinese universities used X/Twitter to promote specific ideological narratives, position themselves as world-class institutions, and navigate power dynamics within global higher education.

Hall's theory emphasizes that representations are shaped by cultural and social practices that influence how we perceive the world. In my study, I employed representation to analyze how the meaning of a "world-class Chinese university" is communicated through specific narratives, symbols, and images in tweets. For example, in Chapter 4, I used representation to examine how ZJU constructed its identity as a global leader in research through signifying practices such as hashtags (#ZJUresearch and #SDG) and visuals depicting researchers in high-tech laboratories. These practices were not just descriptive but actively construct meaning by associating the university with global priorities like the SDGs. This use of representation theory allowed me to unpack how ZJU's tweets worked to fix the meaning of research excellence as synonymous with technological innovation and alignment with global standards.

Hall's concept of identification also manifests in my analysis, particularly in Chapter 5 in analyzing how universities aim to construct national and cultural identities that resonate with international audiences. For instance, in Chapter 5, I analyzed how PKU invited international students to identify with Chinese culture through tweets that celebrate traditional festivals. By showcasing students engaging in cultural activities, such as writing calligraphy or participating in festive events, these tweets position students as cultural ambassadors, bridging their own



identities with China's cultural heritage. This identification is further reinforced through visuals that blend traditional symbols, creating a narrative of cultural pride and institutional excellence.

These representations are not neutral; they are shaped by ideological frameworks and power relations that determine which meanings are promoted and which are marginalized. For instance, in Chapter 6, I demonstrated how top Chinese universities emphasize global partnerships with institutions such as the University of Michigan to foster global collaboration, while simultaneously showcasing China's leadership in addressing global challenges. This framing positioned Chinese universities as co-leaders in global higher education, while the focus on prestigious Western partnerships reflects broader power dynamics within international academia. Thus, through Hall's representation, my analysis uncovered how these universities use social media to construct an image of themselves navigating and negotiating the existing power hierarchies that continue to shape global higher education.

Fairclough's CDA complements this foundational framework by situating these representational practices within broader ideological, societal, and power relations. This macro-level analysis allowed me to examine how power relations and societal structures both shape and are shaped by discourse. By applying CDA, I considered how these discourses reflected and reinforced larger ideological frameworks, such as China's soft power strategy and its growing influence in global education.

For instance, in Chapter 6, I applied CDA to examine power in the representation of Ping-pong Diplomacy. At the social level, I analyzed how Ping-pong Diplomacy was represented in PKU's tweets as a symbolic act of global cultural engagement. Through tweets showcasing student participation in sports diplomacy, such as table tennis matches between American and Chinese students, PKU framed itself as sites of cross-cultural exchange and goodwill. This aligns

with China's soft power strategy of using educational institutions to build international ties and present China as a welcoming, culturally rich global player. By highlighting students' engagement in such activities, universities positioned themselves as academic institutions and key actors in international diplomacy.

Finally, visual analysis significantly enriches both representation theory and CDA by focusing explicitly on the aesthetic and compositional choices that shape the reception and interpretation of representations. As the visual is a crucial component of discourse, this analysis adds another layer of interpretive complexity to CDA by illuminating how visual elements mediate ideological meanings, reinforce power relations, and influence audience perception. I incorporated visual analysis using visual grammar and photographic techniques to examine how meaning is constructed through visual discourse. In the example of the representation of STEM research, I analyzed how viewpoint, foreground and background, lighting, and mood contributed to the signification of STEM dominance. Many of these images were taken from a low-angle viewpoint, making the scientists appear authoritative and reinforcing the powerful, heroic image of the male scientist. The foreground often highlighted the researcher engaged in hands-on laboratory work, with futuristic lab equipment in the background, subtly reinforcing the message that scientific progress is the defining feature of university excellence. The lighting was typically bright, sterile, and artificial, symbolizing precision, rationality, and high-tech innovation. The overall mood of these images conveyed a sense of progress, determination, and forward-thinking ambition, reinforcing a neoliberal academic narrative that prioritizes STEM advancements as the driving force of global competitiveness.

## CHAPTER 4: REPRESENTING RESEARCH EXCELLENCE

While organizing and coding all data collected, I found research excellence emerged as a predominant theme in top Chinese universities' representation on X/Twitter. Research excellence, in the context of higher education, is often referred to high standard of scholarly output, such as publishing on high-impact journals, securing competitive research grants, and contributing to knowledge advancement and societal challenges (Hazelkorn, 2015). These contributions are often quantified by metrics such as citation counts, impact factors of journals, and the amount of research funding secured (Pinar & Horne, 2022). These metrics, however, simplify research excellence to a set of numbers, and often privileging certain types of research or disciplines over others, particularly in the humanities and social sciences (HSS) (Fecher, et al., 2021). Therefore, in this chapter, I explore how the theme research excellence was represented by top Chinese universities on X/Twitter, what narratives and visual grammars the tweets employed in shaping academic legitimacy, disciplinary hierarchies, and the geopolitics of knowledge production in Chinese higher education.

In this chapter, I analyze how top Chinese universities actively construct and reinforce the meaning of research excellence on X/Twitter through specific digital and visual signifying practices that uphold dominant academic hierarchies. These signifying practices include hashtags, emojis, standardized templates featuring university logos and institutional branding, male researchers in lab depictions, and books as a symbolic reduction of HSS. Foregrounding these various signifying practices, I argue that the representation of research excellence by top Chinese universities on X/Twitter privileges STEM fields, reinforces dominant academic and gender hierarchies, and marginalizes the HSS, reflecting hegemonic definitions of what constitutes world-class universities and excellent research rooted in male-dominated

technoscientific achievement and metric-driven valuation. In my multimodal analysis, I identified visual representation as particularly impactful in shaping narratives of research excellence, with images of male researchers in lab settings dominating visual representation of STEM excellence, while the HSS fields are visually reduced the single and static icon of books.

In this chapter, I begin by introducing the strategic initiatives China has implemented to enhance research excellence within its higher education system and discuss the gender disparities, particularly the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields. I then examine how top Chinese universities construct global prestige through STEM research, focusing on key signifying practices such as hashtags, emojis, and visual representation. This is followed by an analysis of the standardized templates used to highlight research achievements and how research is strategically framed to influence policymaking. Moving beyond STEM, I explore the underrepresentation of HSS in these portrayals, highlighting the disparities in visibility and framing. Finally, I discuss the gendered and cultural politics of academic representation, examining how visual and textual narratives reinforce existing academic hierarchies and power dynamics.

### **China's Pursuit of Research Excellence and Gender Dynamics in Higher Education**

In recent decades, China has been actively promoting its research capacity driven by China's ambition to enhance its global competitiveness and build world-class universities (Huang, 2015). To achieve the goal of transforming some of the top Chinese universities to world's leading institutions, the Chinese government has launched several significant initiatives, particularly through the "Double First-class" initiative (Peters & Besley, 2019). These initiatives aim to build a select group of universities and disciplines into world-class level by investing them substantial financial and policy support. As global university rankings have become

important metrics to measure a university's prestige and reputation, Chinese universities have been striving to improve their positions in rankings, which often heavily weight research output and impact (Kang & Mok, 2024). These efforts aim to elevate the quality and standing of Chinese higher education institutions on the international stage (Zong & Wang, 2019).

The promotion of research excellence in Chinese higher education not only enhances the country's academic standing but also aligns with the nation's broader political and economic objectives and ambitions to become a global leader in innovation (Yang & Welch, 2012). As China is trying to transition from a manufacturing-based economy to a knowledge-based one, higher education institutions are expected to generate cutting-edge research that can drive technological advancements, enhance international competitiveness, and contribute to national development (Marginson, 2022). To achieve these goals, STEM education and research, in particular, have been prioritized as China's national strategy, supported by a range of educational policies and initiatives aimed at boosting the economy through technological means (Ma, 2021). In addition, research excellence is crucial for attracting and retaining top talents. By creating high-quality research environments, Chinese universities can better compete for leading scholars and promising students, and the talent pool is essential for driving innovation and maintaining China's competitiveness in key fields (Zha & Hayhoe, 2014).

The marginalization of the HSS in China's higher education system has deep historical roots and continues to manifest in contemporary policies and institutional practices. In the early 1950s, the Chinese government, influenced by Soviet educational models, undertook a significant reorganization of its higher education institutions. This reorganization prioritized scientific and technical disciplines to align with national economic plans, leading to a substantial reduction in HSS departments and course offerings because humanities were considered

characteristic of the bourgeoisie (Li, 2005). This STEM-centric focus has persisted, with contemporary policies and funding mechanisms favoring science and technology over HSS. Consequently, HSS disciplines often receive less institutional support and face limited research funding. Political oversight further exacerbates the marginalization of HSS. This environment stifles critical inquiry and diminishes the global influence of Chinese HSS research. Despite China's significant output in natural sciences, its contributions to global HSS scholarship remain limited (Zhou & Leydesdorff, 2024).

In China's academic landscape, particularly within STEM fields, a pronounced gender disparity persists, with men predominantly occupying positions of power and influence, while women often face systemic marginalization (Miao, 2023). This underrepresentation is not solely a consequence of individual choices but is deeply rooted in structural and cultural factors. From early education, societal expectations and gender stereotypes influence subject selection, steering many female students away from STEM pathways (He et al., 2020). Within academic institutions, organizational cultures often perpetuate gender biases. Higher education institutions in China have been described as gendered organizations that create, fortify, and reproduce gender inequalities. Women academics frequently encounter challenges such as underrepresentation in research activities, limited access to funding, and barriers to leadership positions (Miao 2023). Moreover, implicit biases and gender-based discrimination further hinder women's advancement in academia. Female academics often face implicit biases, gender-based discrimination, and have low psychological well-being in different settings in academia, including labs and conferences (Yang et al., 2022).

Understanding the above background of Chinese higher education is crucial for contextualizing the findings presented in the subsequent sections. Building upon the discussion

of China's drive for research excellence and the associated challenges in disciplinary and gender inequities, I will discuss my empirical findings in the following sections.

### **Constructing Global Prestige Through STEM Research**

In this section, I explore how top Chinese universities represent the theme of research excellence by prioritizing STEM research, using this emphasis to fix meaning around their identity as leaders in global higher education. I examine how these institutions convey their excellence in STEM through various tweets, shaping and solidifying the image of what a world-class Chinese university should represent in terms of research excellence. This focus on STEM allows these universities to project a specific narrative of academic prestige and global competitiveness through social media representations.

In analyzing how top Chinese universities represent research excellence, I have selected specific institutions to highlight distinct strategies employed in their social media representations. This targeted approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the diverse methods utilized to construct and convey their identities as leaders in global higher education. In the following sections, I analyze how ZJU, SJTU and THU use particular signifying practices to represent their research excellence in the STEM fields. ZJU provides a representative case that encapsulates the common patterns such as using hashtags, emojis and visuals found across all institutions. SJTU employs standardized templates in social media communications, ensuring consistency and reinforcing brand identity. THU aligns its research with national policy directives, enhancing its prestige as a contributor to policy-relevant research. In contrast, PKU emphasizes HSS, providing a counterpoint to the STEM-focused approaches of other institutions, as discussed in the later sections. By analyzing these varied approaches, I aim to unpack the multifaceted strategies top Chinese universities use to construct and communicate

their identities as world-class universities.

### ***ZJU's Use of Hashtags, Emojis, and Visual Representation***

In analyzing the representation of research excellence by top Chinese universities on X/Twitter, I found that practicing signifiers—such as hashtags, emojis, and visuals—play a crucial role in shaping institutional identity and engagement. Universities employ these strategies not merely to disseminate research findings but to construct a compelling and accessible narrative of scientific prestige and global impact. Among the four universities examined, ZJU provides a representative case that encapsulates the common patterns found across all institutions. Thus, rather than analyzing all four universities simultaneously, I have chosen to focus on ZJU in this section to provide a more detailed and structured discussion of these common trends. This focused approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how digital markers shape the meaning of research excellence without redundancy.

#### **Hashtags.**

In analyzing how ZJU represented research excellence on X/Twitter, I observed that hashtags played a significant role in shaping the identity of tweets. ZJU frequently used hashtags such as #ZJUresearch, #ZJUfaculty, #SuperZJUer, #SDG, and #Z4G (ZJU for Social Good) to indicate that a tweet highlighted the university's research accomplishments. While ZJU represented a range of research outcomes on X/Twitter, I observed that a significant portion of its highlighted research centered around themes related to #SDG and #Z4G. To me, this emphasis signaled a deliberate attempt to align the university's research agenda with pressing global challenges. For instance, Figure 2 illustrated how ZJU scientists focused on “achieving strong research outcomes in good health and well-being,” “sustainable cities and communities,” and “affordable clean energy” (ZJU, 2024, January 21). I found it particularly striking that beyond



these broad themes, the university frequently showcased specific research efforts aimed at addressing urgent societal issues. Some tweets detailed how ZJU scientists worked to “address #climatechange, ensure #foodsecurity, and enhance the well-being of mankind” (ZJU, 2024, February 13), while others highlighted projects mitigating “PM2.5 air pollution” (ZJU, 2024, January 23), reducing nitrogen pollution (ZJU, 2023, December 16), and exploring innovative approaches to cancer treatment (ZJU, 2023, December 3).



**Zhejiang University**  
@ZJU\_China



Over the past five years, faculty members at #ZJU authored more than 82,500 academic papers pertaining to the 17 #SDGs🌍, achieving strong research outcomes in good health and well-being👨👩, sustainable cities and communities🏙️, and affordable clean energy🌱. #SDG #Z4G



👤 World Economic Forum and 9 others

3:06 PM · Jan 21, 2024 · 67.9K Views

**Figure 2: Screenshot of the tweet on ZJU’s X account (2024, January 21)**

These representations did more than just communicate research achievements—they projected ZJU’s identity as a socially responsible institution committed to sustainable development. The university’s recurring focus on climate change, pollution reduction, and public health reinforced its positioning as an active contributor to addressing some of the world’s most pressing issues. I saw a clear pattern in how ZJU framed its research as not just advancing scientific knowledge but also driving real-world impact. By explicitly aligning its initiatives with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, the university strategically reinforced its role in creating sustainable cities, expanding access to affordable and clean energy, and promoting overall well-being. In addition, I found it compelling that ZJU placed strong emphasis on food security, medical advancements, and the integration of blue energy into climate policy frameworks—further reinforcing its commitment to improving quality of life and fostering a healthier, more sustainable world. The strategy of promoting research aligned with SDG goals resonates with Lander and Stever (2018), who emphasized that social media serves as a platform for lifelong learning, transcending time and place and Dhiman (2023) who highlighted the social media’s role in disseminating information, shaping public opinion, and fostering positive behavioral changes essential for sustainable development. Through X/Twitter, ZJU not only disseminates its research findings but also fosters a culture of continuous learning and global responsibility. To me, this approach reflected a well-calibrated effort to position the university as both a leader in scientific research and a key player in tackling urgent societal challenges. By framing its research within this broader discourse of sustainability and social impact, ZJU elevated its institutional reputation and demonstrated its role in shaping a more equitable and sustainable future.

## Emojis.

What stood out to me even more was how the university went beyond textual markers to construct a visually and emotionally engaging narrative. I found it particularly interesting that ZJU strategically employed emojis to add vibrancy and emphasis to its tweets. The frequent use of emojis such as “🏆” (prize), “🎉” and “👏” (congratulations), “💡” (energy), “🧑🔬” (scientist), and “🌐” (global impact) transformed what might have been a routine research announcement into something more dynamic and celebratory. To me, this approach suggested an intentional effort to make research achievements more accessible and engaging to a broader audience beyond the academic community.

As I analyzed these tweets, I realized that emojis functioned as semiotic resources that shaped meaning through both affective and symbolic dimensions. I noticed that celebratory emojis like “🎉” and “👏” helped ZJU frame its research breakthroughs as exciting, prestigious, and worthy of public recognition. These visual elements did more than just decorate the tweets; they actively invited audiences—both within and outside academia—to recognize and celebrate the university’s research accomplishments. When I saw the “🏆” emoji, I interpreted it as reinforcing the competitive nature of scientific excellence, signaling that ZJU researchers were producing work that was recognized on national and global stages. The use of “💡” in tweets about technological advancements caught my attention because it conveyed a sense of momentum and energy, making research feel dynamic and forward-moving.

Beyond their affective function, I saw that emojis also served as a form of visual shorthand that made complex research more digestible. The “🧑🔬” emoji, for example, added a human element to the tweets, reinforcing the role of individual faculty and researchers in driving knowledge production. This struck me as an intentional way to personalize the research process,

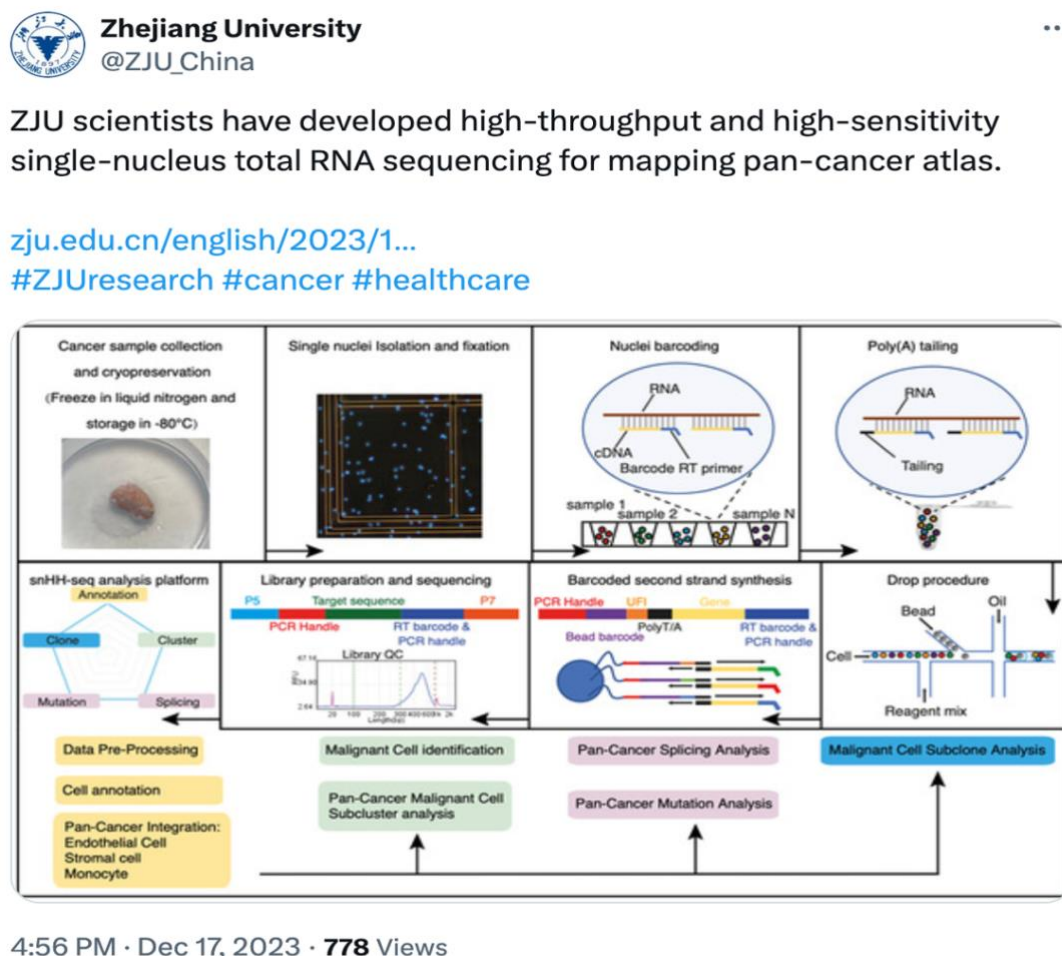
shifting the focus from abstract scientific achievements to the people behind them. I also found the “🌍” emoji particularly telling—it consistently appeared in tweets that highlighted research linked to global issues, such as sustainability and the SDGs. To me, this suggested that ZJU was not just promoting its research as academically excellent but also positioning it as socially and globally relevant.

As I reflected on these patterns, I realized that by embedding these visual signifiers within tweets, ZJU transformed its research communication from a static, institutional broadcast into something more interactive and engaging. The playful yet purposeful use of emojis contributed to a digital identity that merged academic rigor with approachability, making research excellence feel more relatable and emotionally resonant. The use of emojis aligns with Varda (2024), who noted that emojis can convey non-verbal cues, adding emotional depth to digital communication. I saw this as a particularly strategic move—one that allowed ZJU to extend its institutional branding beyond academic circles to engage broader audiences, including prospective students, policymakers, and the general public. Nixon and Guajardo (2024) found that the use of emojis can enhance perceptions of likability and approachability in digital interactions. Therefore, many audiences might not have been familiar with the technical intricacies of scientific research, but they could still connect with its broader impact through these visual cues. This approach reinforced my understanding of how social media operates not just as a platform for dissemination but as a tool for meaning-making, shaping the way universities construct and fix the image of research excellence in the digital space.

### **Visual Representation.**

When examining the content of these tweets, I noticed a structured pattern in how ZJU presented its research. The university typically introduced research outcomes, highlighted their

significance, and specified the venues where the research had been published. However, what stood out to me was how ZJU relied on visual strategies to make complex scientific processes more comprehensible and engaging. As Zhang and Jenkinson (2024) noted, visual elements are significant in communicating complex scientific concepts effectively. Many tweets featured graphics that distilled intricate findings into digestible formats or included links to external sources for further reading (see Figure 3). The practice of visualizing research outcome is consistent with the notion that visual communication can enhance the relatability and impact of scientific content (Landis & Duscher 2023). Another particularly compelling strategy was the



**Figure 3: Screenshot of the tweet on ZJU's X account (2023, December 17)**

use of photographs featuring ZJU researchers themselves. These images did more than document

achievements; they humanized the researchers and positioned them as integral to the university's reputation for research excellence. I saw that these tweets often celebrated individual researchers receiving prestigious awards or making significant contributions to their fields, reinforcing the idea that the university valued both institutional and individual success.

This emphasis on visual representation was not unique to ZJU but reflected a broader trend among top Chinese universities in constructing the image of research excellence. Beyond textual and thematic narratives, the visual domain played a crucial role in shaping perceptions of scientific prestige. One particularly striking and recurring representation was the image of male researchers in laboratory settings, as exemplified in Figure 2. I noticed that this type of imagery consistently appears across posts highlighting STEM research, reinforcing established visual tropes associated with scientific inquiry. In this specific image, the close-up perspective draws attention to a researcher looking intently through a microscope. To me, this framing serves a dual function: it emphasizes the meticulous and precise nature of scientific work while also constructing an image of dedication and intellectual rigor. The microscope, positioned as the focal point of the scene, acts as a powerful symbol of inquiry and precision, reinforcing the notion that cutting-edge research demands both concentration and technical expertise.

I also found it notable that the background of the image is deliberately blurred, directing the viewer's attention to the interaction between the researcher and the microscope. This choice not only isolates the act of scientific discovery but also subtly suggests the presence of a high-tech laboratory environment. The artificial lighting, which is characteristic of such spaces, further enhances this impression, evoking a sense of modernity and technological advancement. Another element that stood out to me was the researcher's protective clothing and mask. These visual markers, often associated with biosafety and controlled laboratory conditions, contribute

to a broader narrative of precision, discipline, and a commitment to advancing scientific knowledge.

What struck me the most was how this imagery aligns with global visual representations of scientific modernity and progress. By depicting research in a way that resonates with widely recognized symbols of technological excellence, these universities project an image of innovation and institutional prestige. To me, this not only appeals to prospective students and researchers but also reinforces a broader aspirational narrative—one that positions these institutions as leaders in the competitive landscape of global STEM research. As Pauwels (2006) suggested the importance of visual elements in shaping public perceptions, through this carefully curated visual language, ZJU and other top Chinese universities construct an aspirational vision of scientific excellence that aligns with global discourses on technological progress and intellectual leadership.

ZJU's approaches to representing research excellence are the most common pattern I observed among top Chinese universities. However, it was not the only way universities constructed their image of research excellence. SJTU, for example, adopted a more structured and standardized format to communicate their accomplishments. In the next section, I illustrate how SJTU strategically used a standardized format to present its research achievements.

### ***SJTU's Use of Standardized Template***

Among four top Chinese universities, I noticed that SJTU takes a distinguished approach by employing a standardized template to represent its research accomplishments under the theme of "SJTU Research" (see Figure 4). To me, this structured approach reflects an intentional effort to create a cohesive and recognizable identity for its research communications. The template provides a consistent format for each tweet, typically starting with the researcher's name and



**Shanghai Jiao Tong University**

@sjtu1896

...

Prof. Qiu Huibin's team at SJTU's Zhangjiang Institute developed a novel strategy for vertical conjugated micellar brushes, a breakthrough in material science, published in "Angewandte Chemie." 🎉

#SJTUResearch



4:56 PM · Feb 28, 2024 · 321 Views

**Figure 4: Screenshot of the tweet on SJTU's X account (2024, February 28)**

affiliation, followed by a brief mention of their research contribution and the journal where the work was published. I found it particularly interesting that some tweets also include the digital object identifier (DOI), which facilitates direct access to the publications. This detail, though seemingly minor, demonstrates SJTU's emphasis on accessibility and academic engagement. In addition to textual consistency, SJTU strategically employs common hashtags such as #SJTUResearch to categorize these tweets, making them more searchable and directly linking them to the broader theme of research excellence. The inclusion of emojis like “🎉” to celebrate



achievements further adds an element of enthusiasm, making the posts more engaging for viewers.

The visual component of the template is particularly striking. Each image prominently features the SJTU logo in the top left corner, with “SJTU Research” displayed in large, bold text, ensuring immediate brand recognition. Below this, icons representing various scientific fields—DNA for biology, an internet symbol for technology, an atomic structure for physics, and a beaker for chemistry—help viewers quickly identify the research area. I was especially drawn to how Figure 4, for example, uses vertical conjugated micellar brushes to represent “Material Science,” set against a blue background that gives the image a clean, professional appearance. This standardized visual approach does more than ensure consistency across research-related tweets; I argue that it actively reinforces SJTU’s online branding, making their content easily recognizable and visually distinct from that of other institutions.

In addition, I observed that while SJTU’s template maintains visual uniformity, it does not impose a rigid aesthetic at the expense of disciplinary diversity. Symbols such as flames for innovative energy, computers for computational science, and robots for artificial intelligence allow for differentiation while preserving a polished and cohesive look. To me, this reflects a strategic balance between consistency and adaptability—ensuring that each research field retains its unique identity while still fitting within the broader SJTU research brand. However, as I examined the distribution of research topics featured in these posts, I noticed a clear emphasis on STEM fields. While this focus is unsurprising given the university’s strengths, I argue that it also reveals an imbalance, where achievements in non-STEM disciplines receive comparatively little attention. This raises important questions about how SJTU constructs its institutional identity through social media and whether this visual strategy reinforces existing hierarchies of academic

prestige.

Beyond highlighting research outcomes and faculty accomplishments, some universities sought to emphasize the broader societal and policy impact of their academic work. In the next section, I examine how THU showcased its faculty's engagement in China's "Two Sessions," highlighting their role in shaping national policy and reinforcing the university's influence beyond academia.

### ***Research for Policy Making as Represented by THU***

While other universities appear to focus primarily on showcasing their research accomplishments, I observed that THU takes a different approach by strategically highlighting its faculty's participation in China's "Two Sessions" to emphasize the influence and involvement of its academic staff in shaping national policy. The "Two Sessions," comprising the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), are critical events in China's political landscape, where significant national strategies and policy directions are formulated. To me, THU's decision to feature its faculty in these high-profile events signals more than just academic prestige; it actively constructs an image of the university as a key player in national development. Marginson (2018) noted on the role of universities in national governance, where elite institutions often act as think tanks and policy advisors to the state. In China, Mok (2022) suggested that universities in China are increasingly being positioned as key contributors to policy formation. Thus, by showcasing its scholars' direct contributions to addressing pressing societal issues, THU positions itself not only as a top research institution but also as a central contributor to China's policy-making process. This strategic alignment suggests that THU sees itself as an intellectual hub where knowledge production directly informs national governance. THU's representation bridging academia and

policy aligns with Yang and Welch (2012), who argued that China's leading universities are expected to serve as national strategic assets, using their research expertise to support government priorities.

I noticed that the research highlighted through these engagements primarily focused on STEM fields, reinforcing a pattern seen in the social media strategies of other top Chinese universities. For example, in one tweet (March 12, 2024), THU highlighted a professor's insights on "systematic planning and scientific assessments" as essential to developing new productive forces. I found this framing particularly interesting because it did not merely celebrate an individual scholar's expertise but positioned the professor as an authoritative voice in discussions on optimizing China's productivity through scientific methods. This tweet illustrated how THU faculty contributed directly to national economic planning, reinforcing the university's intellectual authority in guiding China's development strategies. In another instance (March 10, 2024), THU featured a professor discussing the challenges of integrating green electricity into China's power grid, emphasizing the need for an enabling environment for supply-side innovation. To me, this emphasis on technological solutions to environmental issues underscored THU's deliberate positioning as a leader in sustainable development. Similarly, in a tweet from March 9, 2024, THU showcased a professor's perspective on modernizing China's food production systems. The professor stressed the importance of optimizing planting structures and integrating new technologies into farming practices. By framing agricultural modernization as a research priority, THU not only asserted its role in tackling food security—a critical national issue—but also signaled its alignment with government-led initiatives in rural development.

The visual elements in these posts were particularly revealing. I noticed that each faculty member was depicted in a formal setting wearing professional attire, reinforcing an image of

authority and expertise. This stylistic choice was significant—it went beyond personal branding and instead constructed a broader institutional identity that intertwined individual academic achievement with THU’s reputation. For instance, one professor was photographed in a lab-like environment, emphasizing his role in scientific planning, while another was shown in a formal interview setting, reinforcing his expertise in energy policy. The background of each image included subtle institutional cues, such as the THU logo or a professional setting, which served to elevate individual scholars’ contributions as reflections of the university’s broader mission. I see this visual strategy as a deliberate effort to present THU faculty not just as academics but as public intellectuals whose research has a tangible impact on national governance. This representation of THU faculty aligns with Macfarlane’s (2011) argument that university faculty possess the skills and expertise to contribute meaningfully to public and social policy.

I argue that these representations serve multiple strategic purposes for THU. By highlighting faculty involvement in the “Two Sessions,” THU not only enhanced its visibility and influence beyond academic circles but also strengthened its reputation as a leader in research that has real-world applications. This strategy reflects a calculated effort to frame research excellence not as an abstract pursuit but as an essential component of national development. As Mok (2022) argued, Chinese universities are increasingly expected to bridge the gap between academia and government decision-making. By portraying its scholars as key contributors to national dialogues, THU asserts that its research does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it has direct implications for China’s economic, social, and technological advancement. What stands out to me is how THU uses this narrative to extend its academic influence into the realm of governance, positioning itself as an institution where scientific expertise meets policy implementation. Moreover, this approach suggests that THU’s expertise extends beyond the

laboratory and classroom, playing a crucial role in national decision-making. The emphasis on STEM-driven research, particularly in fields like renewable energy, agricultural modernization, and digital healthcare, allows THU to showcase its alignment with China's national priorities. To me, this signals a deeper institutional strategy—one that goes beyond academic prestige to establish THU as a thought leader actively shaping the country's future.

### **Underrepresentation of Humanities and Social Sciences**

While previous sections highlighted how top Chinese universities construct their image of research excellence through various rhetorical and visual strategies, these representations overwhelmingly prioritize STEM fields. The emphasis on scientific breakthroughs, technological advancements, and global competitiveness positions STEM as the dominant representation of academic prestige. However, this focus comes at the expense of other disciplines, particularly the HSS, which receive significantly less visibility in research communications.

Among the tweets I analyzed, I found that only a small fraction highlight contributions from HSS disciplines, and when they do, their representation feels noticeably limited. While STEM research is often depicted through dynamic and visually engaging imagery—such as laboratories, advanced technology, and collaborative scientific breakthroughs—I noticed that HSS research is primarily depicted through static and conventional imagery, most commonly books. This contrast reflects a broader trend in academia, where STEM is consistently positioned as the engine of innovation and global competitiveness, while HSS remains in the background, framed in more traditional and abstract terms (Marginson, 2016). Marginson's research on global university rankings aligns with my findings, showing how STEM's alignment with economic growth and technological advancement entrenches its dominance, while HSS is relegated to secondary status. To me, this disparity not only affects visibility but also contributes to the

perception that HSS is less relevant to global academic prestige.

Among the universities I examined, only SJTU and PKU made an effort to showcase their research outputs in HSS fields. SJTU incorporates HSS research into its standardized “SJTU Research” template, but I found that the presence of HSS within this format was minimal. Out of all the tweets I reviewed, only four featured HSS disciplines—two focusing on Economics and the remaining two on Translation Studies and Media and Communication. Even when these fields were represented, I noticed that the visual symbols used were strikingly simplistic. Currency symbols were used to represent Economics, while bookshelves symbolized humanities research. This reductive approach mirrors critiques by Nussbaum (2010), who argues that HSS disciplines have been undermined their complexity and societal relevance. Nussbaum’s work supports my observation that such imagery reinforces an implicit hierarchy in how different research fields are valued and communicated. To me, the reliance on such oversimplified visuals does more than just differentiate the fields; it suggests that HSS is not only underrepresented but also visually less engaging, making it easier to overlook in the broader narrative of research excellence.

Compared to SJTU, I observed that PKU included a greater number of tweets featuring HSS research, which aligns with what I know about its long-standing reputation in these disciplines. Although the majority of PKU’s research-related tweets still prioritize STEM achievements, I appreciated how PKU at least made an effort to highlight research in history, language and literature, education, sociology, and journalism. These tweets frequently introduce faculty members by name, affiliation, and research focus, often including direct quotes or insights into their scholarly work. The approach of using faculty’s quotes resonates with Chouliaraki’s (2013) argument that personal narratives in academia humanize scholarship and

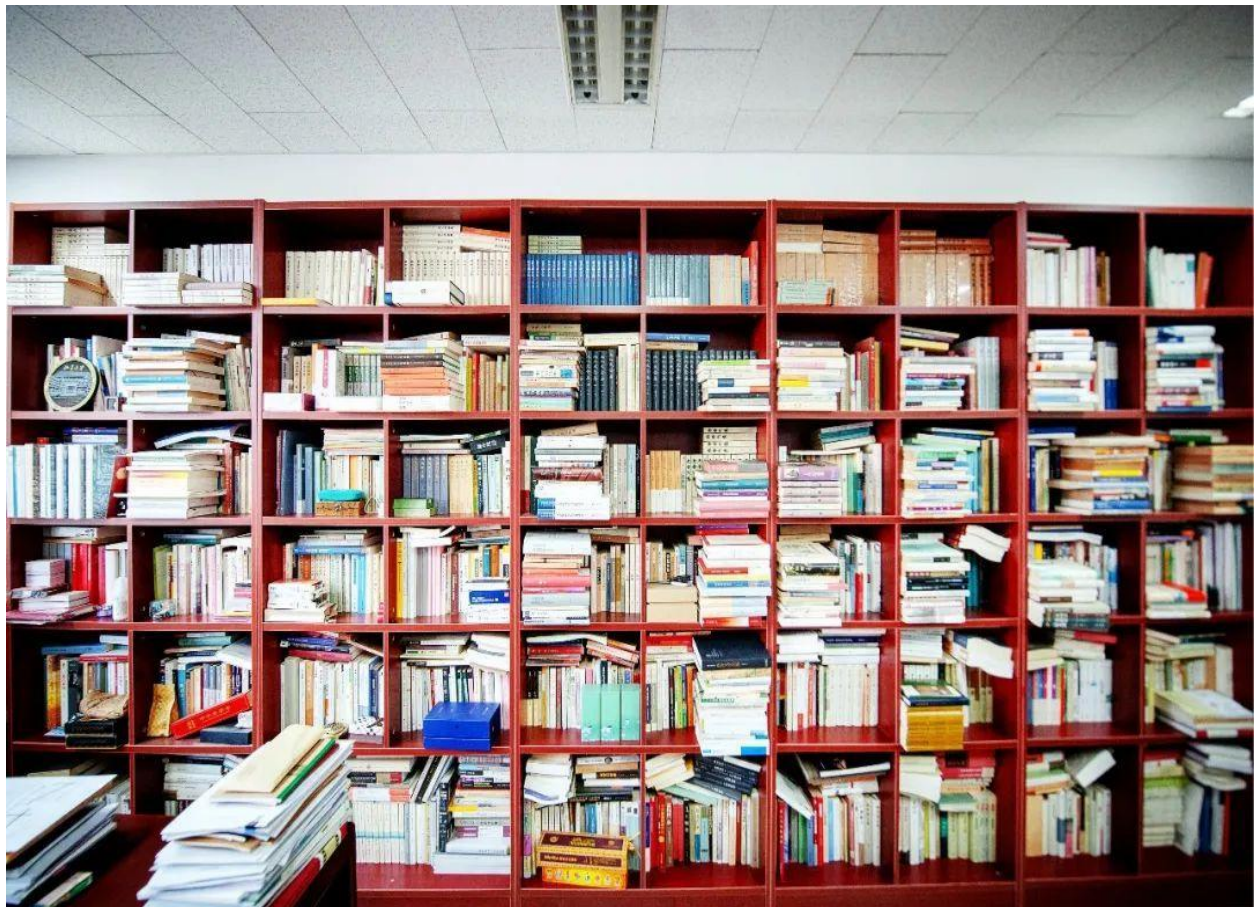
challenge impersonal institutional branding. I found this approach particularly interesting because it does more than just present research findings; it constructs a narrative around the scholars themselves, emphasizing their intellectual depth and individual contributions. In doing so, PKU sets itself apart from other top Chinese universities that largely overlook HSS, presenting itself as an institution that values not only scientific progress but also cultural and intellectual depth.

However, despite PKU's greater emphasis on HSS, I still found that the dominant visual representation of these fields remains centered on books. This pattern stood out to me across multiple tweets, where faculty members were often depicted in personal libraries or academic offices, surrounded by towering bookshelves. A tweet from PKU on February 28, 2024, for example, showcased a professor from the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, emphasizing her ownership of approximately 50,000 books (see Figure 5). The use of symbols aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, where material symbols like books signify scholarly authority. When I analyzed the composition of this image, I saw that the bookshelves dominated the background, stacks of books and papers filled the foreground, and the scholar was positioned at the heart of this literary environment. The image seemed deliberately framed to create a seamless visual narrative of intellectual immersion, reinforcing the idea that knowledge in HSS is deeply rooted in textual study rather than hands-on experimentation.

To me, books serve as a powerful signifier in academia, symbolizing knowledge, learning, and scholarly rigor—qualities that define HSS disciplines. I argue that the prominence of books in these representations immediately communicates an association with intellectual seriousness, allowing viewers to connect with traditional values of scholarship. At the same time,

I found myself questioning whether this reliance on books as a visual marker actually limits how HSS research is perceived. For instance, Liu (2013) also challenges this framing, arguing that privileging textual traditions stifles innovation in HSS, particularly in fields like digital humanities. Unlike STEM, where research is often depicted through futuristic technology and dynamic laboratory settings, I noticed that HSS representations rely on a visual language of tradition rather than innovation. This framing, in my view, could inadvertently reinforce the idea that HSS research is introspective, less forward-looking, and ultimately secondary to STEM.

Through this symbolic framing, I argue that universities like PKU are making a deliberate attempt to assert their legitimacy within HSS while still prioritizing STEM as the dominant driver of institutional prestige. From my perspective, this visual strategy reveals a deeper



**Figure 5: Image of the tweet on PKU's X account (2024, February 28)**



struggle for recognition within a system that overwhelmingly values STEM. As Giroux (2010) argued, academic prestige is not just about research output but also about the power to define what constitutes valuable knowledge. I see this playing out in the way that STEM research, associated with technological and economic progress, is foregrounded in global academic narratives, while HSS remains tied to older symbols of intellectual prestige. Connell (2019) critiques this hierarchy within global academia, where disciplines linked to economic and scientific development are privileged over those contributing to cultural and social understanding. I see this hierarchy reflected in the way Chinese universities represent their research; even when HSS is acknowledged, it is still framed within the confines of tradition, rather than the language of progress that defines STEM.

Although Chinese universities make an effort to feature HSS research, I found that its representation remains both quantitatively limited and visually constrained. Even at institutions like PKU, which actively promote HSS disciplines, books continue to dominate the visual framing, reinforcing traditional academic hierarchies. This imbalance echoes Marginson's (2016) analysis of how global university systematically undervalue HSS in favor of STEM metrics. This imbalance, to me, is not just about visibility—it is about how research excellence is defined and who gets to be part of that conversation. While STEM research is positioned as a symbol of progress and global competitiveness, HSS remains associated with scholarly depth but not necessarily with institutional innovation. To me, this reveals a broader issue in higher education—one where certain disciplines are consistently prioritized over others, shaping not only institutional branding but also the way knowledge itself is valued.

However, the disparities in research representation are not only disciplinary but also intersect with gender and cultural politics. In the following section, I analyze how visual

representations of academic research reinforce gendered and cultural norms, particularly through the recurring portrayal of male scientists in laboratory settings and the static depiction of HSS research. By examining these patterns, I highlight how institutional narratives around research excellence contribute to the reproduction of broader social and academic inequalities.

### **The Gendered and Cultural Politics of Academic Representation**

The visual representations of academic disciplines carried implicit messages about the value and legitimacy of different fields of study. While these images may have seemed neutral, I found that they were embedded with power dynamics that reinforced stereotypes, marginalized certain voices, and perpetuated hierarchical distinctions between disciplines.

In my analysis, I critically examined how the representation of male researchers in high-tech labs for STEM fields and the reliance on books to depict HSS research contributed to problematic portrayals that reinforced gender, disciplinary, and cultural biases within academia. I chose these two specific visual representations—male researchers in laboratories and books in HSS depictions—because they were among the most recurrent and visually distinct patterns across the universities’ research communications. The male scientist in a lab setting was a dominant trope in STEM-related tweets, reinforcing the association between masculinity, scientific authority, and technological innovation. As Yang and Gao (2021) demonstrated, the persistent gender imbalance in STEM fields in China is reinforced through achievement motivation and gender socialization, which shape perceptions of who belongs in these spaces.

Similarly, books were the most frequently used visual marker for HSS research, symbolizing intellectual depth but also positioning these disciplines as traditional, passive, and disconnected from contemporary global advancements. By focusing on these two prominent visual patterns, I aim to critically examine how institutional representations of research

excellence perpetuate not only disciplinary hierarchies but also gendered and cultural biases that shape perceptions of academic value and legitimacy.

One of the most pervasive representations of STEM research featured male researchers in high-tech laboratories (Figure 2), often surrounded by cutting-edge technology, sleek equipment, and futuristic settings. These visuals not only elevated the status of STEM fields by associating them with innovation, progress, and practical applications but also reinforced the perception that these disciplines were more prestigious. Gendered stereotypes in STEM are arguably global phenomena, rooted in cultural narratives that link masculinity to technical prowess (Charles & Bradley (2009). In the Chinese context, STEM fields are often positioned as essential to national development, and this emphasis has historically been associated with male figures, further solidifying the gendered nature of these disciplines (Yang & Gao, 2021). By repeatedly portraying men as central figures in high-tech spaces, these images perpetuated the stereotype that scientific mastery and technological innovation were inherently male domains. My analysis echoed Cheryan et al. (2017) argument regarding stereotypes about STEM fields are reinforced through environmental cues, which signal who (males in labs) belongs in these spaces. This framing, to me, did more than just depict the existing gender imbalance in STEM—it actively reproduced cultural narratives that positioned men as natural leaders and innovators in these fields.

This male-centric portrayal not only marginalized women and other underrepresented genders but also contributed to the myth that men were naturally better suited for careers in science and technology. I noticed that such imagery presented a narrow and exclusionary view of scientific inquiry, where men were framed as the primary agents of knowledge production. This narrow representation reflected Bae et al.'s (2023) argument that the “men in labs” visual trope

was especially salient in East Asian universities, mirroring the underrepresentation of women in the hard sciences (p. 154). I found that this visual dominance discouraged diversity and inclusion by reinforcing the idea that women and non-binary individuals lacked the intellectual or technical capacity to excel in STEM fields. Over time, these images created a self-perpetuating cycle where the exclusion of women and gender minorities from STEM was both normalized and reinforced.

While the representation of male researchers in STEM revealed problematic gender biases, I also found that the visual representation of HSS through books (Figure 5) carried its own set of concerns. To me, the reliance on books as the primary symbol for HSS suggested a prioritization of a Eurocentric tradition of scholarship that valued written knowledge over other forms of intellectual engagement (Mbembe, 2016). This framing positioned HSS scholars and their institutions within an academic hierarchy where book collections became markers of prestige, reinforcing the idea that scholarly authority derived not only from research but from traditional academic imagery. Nevertheless, scholars like Liu (2013) already highlighted how digital humanities methodologies could challenge traditional scholarly hierarchies. Therefore, in my analysis, I saw that this emphasis conveyed a narrow view of what constituted valuable scholarship, excluding non-Western and contemporary forms of knowledge production (Risam, 2018). This troubled me because it limited how HSS research was recognized as a dynamic contributor to pressing global and social challenges.

I also observed that the dominance of books in these portrayals reinforced stereotypes about the nature of HSS work, portraying it as passive and introspective—centered on reading, writing, and reflection—rather than dynamic, interactive, and problem-solving. This narrow depiction undermined the visibility of diverse methodologies within HSS, such as community-

engaged research, digital humanities, and public history (Risam, 2018). By repeatedly associating HSS with static imagery, universities constrained the scope of what was considered legitimate and impactful knowledge production. I found this especially problematic because it diminished recognition of alternative research outputs that challenged traditional academic boundaries and engaged with contemporary social issues in more innovative ways.

Additionally, I was concerned about how this limited visual representation shaped perceptions of legitimate scholarship and who was recognized as a knowledge producer. When books dominated the visual narrative for HSS, other forms of scholarly output—such as digital archives, interactive exhibitions, and participatory research—were often overlooked. This not only marginalized alternative knowledge practices but also reinforced a Eurocentric view of scholarship that failed to account for the plurality of voices and methodologies in HSS research (Mbembe, 2016). Like Tuhiwai Smith (1999) critiqued, Western academia often privileges written texts as the primary mode of knowledge while marginalizes Indigenous and oral traditions. Thus, I argue that this narrow framing ultimately contributed to the continued marginalization of HSS by reinforcing rigid academic hierarchies that privileged traditional scholarship over more diverse and contemporary research practices.

Both the male scientist in the lab and the book-centric representation of HSS contributed to a larger narrative that maintained the dominance of certain academic traditions while marginalizing others. These representations were problematic not only because they reinforced gender and cultural stereotypes but also because they restricted the recognition and value of diverse forms of research and knowledge production. By focusing on a narrow set of symbols, universities risked overlooking the broader and more inclusive contributions that academia could make in addressing the complex global challenges of our time.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyzed how top Chinese universities utilize strategic social media practices to establish their identities as global research leaders, particularly within STEM disciplines. I analyzed signifying practices those institutions employed such as hashtags, emojis, standardized templates featuring university logos and institutional branding, male researchers in lab depictions, and books as a symbolic reduction of HSS. By analyzing these signifying practices, I demonstrated how these universities construct a cohesive and recognizable identity centered on their research achievements. However, I argued that these representations overwhelmingly privilege STEM fields, portraying research excellence primarily through images of male researchers in laboratory settings while reducing the HSS to static symbols such as books. I suggested that this emphasis reproduces power dynamics in higher education, reinforcing the dominance of STEM disciplines while marginalizing HSS and perpetuating gendered and hierarchical structures within academia. Through this chapter, I illustrated how top Chinese universities use social media to fix the meaning of research excellence in ways that serve institutional branding and national positioning, reinforcing China's broader ambitions of technological and economic leadership. By critically engaging with these representations, I unpacked the ways in which social media discourse shapes academic legitimacy, disciplinary hierarchies, and the geopolitics of knowledge production in Chinese higher education.

For the next chapter, my focus shifts to the role of student engagement in China's cultural diplomacy efforts. In the chapter, I will discuss how Chinese universities represent international student involvement on X/Twitter, and how this engagement serves as a tool for advancing China's soft power goals. By examining the representation of international students' participation in cultural activities and initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, I will

analyze how educational exchanges and student interactions contribute to fostering intercultural dialogue. My analysis will show the significance of international students as ambassadors in cultural diplomacy, which reflect China's strategic use of higher education to enhance its global influence.

## **CHAPTER 5: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN CHINA'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY**

In the previous chapter, I focused on the research accomplishments of faculty at top Chinese universities. In this chapter, I shift my focus to students. While organizing and coding my data, I found student engagement in China's cultural diplomacy emerged as a significant theme in top Chinese universities' representation on X/Twitter. Student engagement involves students' participation in academic, social, and extracurricular activities (Fredricks et al., 2004). In higher education, student engagement is argued as a critical determinant of students' achievement and learning (Kahu, 2013). Cultural diplomacy, closely linked to the idea of soft power, refers to the practice of using cultural exchanges and initiatives to promote mutual understanding and strengthen relationship between nations while showcasing a nation's cultural richness and values to enhance its global image and influence (Nye, 2004; UNESCO, 2020). In my study, I define the theme student engagement in China's cultural diplomacy as the active participation of students in academic, cultural, and extracurricular activities that contribute to China's soft power strategy by promoting cultural exchange, fostering mutual understanding, and enhancing the global image of China and its universities. Therefore, in this chapter, I particularly explore how student engagement is represented on X/Twitter by top Chinese universities, and how their engagement through the representation serves as a tool for China's cultural diplomacy in achieving its soft power goals.

In this chapter, I analyze how top Chinese universities actively construct and mediate their institutional identities and global positioning on X/Twitter through digital and visual signifying practices that frame student engagement as an extension of China's cultural diplomacy and soft power strategy. These signifying practices include the use of hashtags, the incorporation of emojis, and the visualization of international students participating in traditional celebrations



and technological advancements. In these signifying practices, the universities embed institutional logos and branding elements, feature historical artifacts and campus landmarks to assert cultural heritage, and highlight national symbols such as flags, architecture, and color schemes to align their representations with national identity. They also contextualize student experiences by framing their participation in the BRI to position the universities as key players in China's international influence. Through these signifying practices, I argue that top Chinese universities strategically construct international student engagement on X/Twitter as a form of cultural diplomacy to fix meanings around being globally connected, culturally rich, and technological modernity, which in turn advances China's soft power and positions these universities as world-class institutions in the global higher education landscape. Through the lens of representation and CDA, the tweets around the theme of student engagement helped the universities construct preferred meanings aligned with China's desired global image, while revealing embedded power relations. The seemingly celebratory content such as student participation in traditional festivals, visual displays of ancient artifacts, and engagement in technological development operates as semiotic work in support of China's nation-branding project and its world-class university discourse.

After introducing the background of China's use of higher education as a soft power strategy, I begin my analysis by examining how top Chinese universities represent Han Chinese festivals and solar terms to promote cultural heritage. I then explore how international students celebrate Chinese New Year, showing how they are framed as active participants in Chinese traditions. I then shift to ancient artifacts at PKU, where historical objects and campus landmarks reinforce the university's role as a custodian of China's intellectual and cultural legacy. Finally, I examine students' engagement with the BRI and technological advancements, focusing on how

universities depict international students interacting with cutting-edge technologies, aligning their participation with China's national ambitions.

### **Higher Education as a Soft Power Strategy**

Chinese universities have become significant to China's efforts to expand its global influence through higher education. China's ambition is to position itself as a "leading education power" by 2035, a goal articulated by Chinese President Xi Jinping (Wang, 2024). Engaging students—both domestic and international—serves as one of the strategies for achieving this goal, as it enhances the universities' global appeal and fosters cultural exchanges that contribute to China's public diplomacy (Hartig, 2015). As a result, international students are now playing an increasingly important role in Chinese higher education. Over the past decade, China has significantly increased the number of international students enrolled in its universities, and China has become a leading study destination in the world (Ding, 2016). The presence of international students is mutually beneficial. For China, it enhances the diversity of the academic environment and contributes to the internationalization of its higher education institutions. For the students, China offers valuable opportunities for academic and personal growth, exposure to a different cultural milieu, and potential career prospects in a rapidly growing economy (Ahmad & Shah, 2018).

There are, however, various challenges faced by international students in China, such as language barriers, cultural adjustment, and integration into academic and social life (Larbi & Fu, 2017). To address these challenges, Chinese universities and the government have implemented various support mechanisms such as scholarships and financial aid programs as well as language support services and cultural orientation programs to facilitate smoother transitions for international students (Erudera, n.d.). Despite those challenges, many international students

perceive China as offering valuable opportunities for academic growth (Ahmad & Shah, 2018). Many of these students, upon returning to their home countries, serve as informal ambassadors of Chinese culture. This strategy aims to create a diverse academic environment and help China attract global talent while shaping international students' perceptions of the country. This strategy also aligns with China's strategic aim of using educational exchanges to foster global solidarity and transform its education from a "major power" to "a strong power" (Hartig, 2016; Wang, 2024).

As China's economic and political influence has grown, China also aims to enhance the country's reputation, global image and soft power through non-coercive means such as cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, and international partnerships (Li, 2018; Nye, 2004). A significant component of China's soft power strategy is the BRI, a global development strategy launched in 2013 to enhance infrastructure and trade connectivity between Asia, Europe, and Africa (Yue et al., 2022). While the BRI is often associated with large-scale infrastructure projects, such as railways, ports, and energy facilities, it also encompasses a significant focus on "soft infrastructure," including educational and cultural exchanges to improve and maintain long-term relationships with partner countries (Yue et al., 2022; Zhu & Yang, 2023).

China's higher education sector is arguably one of the biggest winners of the BRI and Chinese universities actively participate in the BRI by collaborating with higher education institutions in participating countries, offering scholarships to students from BRI regions, and facilitating academic exchanges that strengthen educational ties (Gong et al., 2020). By attracting international students and promoting academic collaborations, China aims to position itself as a global leader in education and innovation. This strategy not only enhances China's reputation but also strengthens its influence in shaping global academic discourse (Zhu & Yang, 2023). These

efforts aim to create a favorable perception of China and promote Chinese academic standards and perspectives in global higher education landscape.

With the background of China's strategic use of higher education for cultural diplomacy and soft power expansion, in the next sections, I provide a detailed analysis of how top Chinese universities showcase this theme through representations on X/Twitter. My analysis examined how universities construct narratives of cultural heritage, global participation, and institutional prestige through a variety of representations. Through the analysis, I demonstrated how student engagement is strategically mediated to align with national interests, enhance global visibility, and shape China's higher education brand on the international social media space.




### **SJTU's Representation on Han Chinese Festivals and Solar Terms**

Representing the celebration of Chinese festivals, particularly Han Chinese cultural festivals and introducing solar terms on the Chinese Lunisolar Calendar, was a common theme among the top Chinese universities' tweets. In fact, previous research has indicated that China actively promotes its cultural heritage through public diplomacy, especially through promoting its traditional festivals and customs (Bécard, 2019; Wang et al., 2025). In my analysis, I observed that the tweets were collected over a similar period, during which all four universities celebrated festivals and introduced the solar terms. In this section, I focused on the case of SJTU to examine how its representation of cultural traditions on X/Twitter contributes to the construction of a shared cultural identity. While all four universities I analyzed demonstrated similar patterns of representation in their promotion of cultural activities, I have chosen to concentrate on SJTU for a more in-depth and focused analysis. This approach allowed me to avoid redundancy and provided a detailed examination of one institution's strategies, which serve as a representative case of how Chinese universities fix meanings around cultural identity through digital mediation.

Through this focused analysis, I aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of SJTU's cultural representation, which can then be contextualized within other universities studied in this research.

On X/Twitter, I found that SJTU frequently highlighted and celebrated various Chinese traditional festivals and the 24 solar terms, which, in my view, demonstrated a deliberate effort to establish cultural continuity while also serving an educational function through digital representation. My finding is consistent with research showing that the Chinese government and institutions systematically use digital platforms to promote national culture and strengthen global perceptions of Chinese identity (Gu, 2025; Wang et al., 2025). These celebrations included significant festivals for Han Chinese, such as the Lantern Festival, Chinese New Year, Little Chinese New Year, and Laba Festival. The selection of solar terms, such as Rain Water, the Beginning of Spring, Major Cold, Minor Cold, and Winter Solstice, further demonstrated the university's engagement in linking academic institutions with long-standing cultural traditions. Prior scholarship highlights that such representations contribute to an overarching national branding effort, reinforcing narratives of cultural richness and continuity (Khan, 2025; Bécard, 2019). Based on my analysis, I argue that top Chinese universities do not merely promote cultural heritage but actively participate in fixing and legitimizing dominant meanings of Chinese identity. More than just cultural promotion, these tweets function as educational resources, offering audiences simplified yet informative narratives about the significance of these traditions. This approach echoes previous studies on digital heritage education, which suggest that online platforms enhance accessibility to cultural knowledge and encourage engagement (Kou, 2024). In my view, this pedagogical approach reinforces China's role as a cultural leader, positioning Chinese universities as both academic institutions and cultural ambassadors. By

presenting Chinese traditions in an accessible, engaging, and visually appealing way, these representations go beyond institutional branding—they contribute to a broader ideological project that connects higher education with cultural diplomacy.

In the tweets I analyzed, signifying practices such as, hashtags, emojis and university logos function as semiotic resources that contribute to the ideological framing of Chinese culture. As hashtags often serve as rallying points for digital communities through enhancing cultural narratives and engagement (Longo & Towers Scott, 2023), I observed that hashtags like #SJTUCulture, #ChineseCulture, and #24SolarTerms were consistently used. The hashtags, in particular, act as mechanisms of identification, inviting audiences to associate themselves with China's cultural heritage and serve to increase the visibility of the posts, linking SJTU's cultural content to broader online conversations about Chinese traditions. I also noticed the creative use of emojis, such as the lantern “” and full moon “” for the Lantern Festival or the dragon “” to symbolize the Year of the Dragon. These visual elements, in my view, added a playful yet culturally rich layer to the content. The use of emojis, which visually anchor meaning, enhances affective engagement and creates an emotional appeal that aligns with Hall's (1997) notion of encoding messages for specific audiences. Visually, I observed that SJTU frequently employed images featuring its logo alongside symbols and Chinese characters that represented each festival (see Figure 6). By blending traditional cultural symbols with modern digital media, I argue that SJTU positions itself as a mediator of national identity, bridging the past and the present through its representation practices.

The textual elements of SJTU's tweets play a crucial role in shaping cultural narratives, demonstrating how discourse constructs power and ideology within digital spaces. In my analysis, I found that these tweets not only promote Chinese traditions but also foster



Shanghai Jiao Tong University  
@sjtu1896

...

Snuggle up, #SJTUers — Winter Solstice is here! Short days mean longer nights for fun, right? Let's embrace the winter chill and share—what keeps you warm? 🍲 🧣 ☀️

#SJTU #24SolarTerms #WinterSolstice



6:09 PM · Dec 22, 2023 · 516 Views

**Figure 6: Screenshot of the tweet on SJTU's X account (2023, December 22)**

identification with Chinese culture, appealing to domestic audiences as a reaffirmation of cultural heritage and to global audiences as an invitation to engage with Chinese traditions. Specifically, I noticed that SJTU's tweets often conveyed warm festival greetings and positive sentiments while providing concise explanations of each festival or solar term's cultural significance. For example, during the Lantern Festival, a tweet encouraged followers to

“embrace reunion, hope, lanterns, sweet dumplings” (SJTU, 2024, February 24). To me, this phrasing clearly reinforces collectivist values, framing Chinese traditions as symbols of unity and emotional warmth. Similarly, a tweet about the Little Chinese New Year referenced “celebrating the Kitchen God with offerings of sweets, ensuring good luck” (SJTU, 2024, February 2). I see this as an ideological construction that naturalizes symbolic rituals, reinforcing the idea that cultural heritage is deeply tied to prosperity and harmony. These linguistic choices reflect broader patterns in China’s cultural branding strategy, as observed in studies of state media and online cultural narratives (Wang et al., 2025). Based on my observations, SJTU’s tweets are more than just festive messages; they act as discursive tools that reinforce China’s cultural influence and position Chinese universities as both cultural authorities and active players in global education and diplomacy.

The emphasis on Han Chinese festivals and solar terms reflects a strong commitment to preserving and promoting cultural heritage. However, cultural diplomacy extends beyond representation to interaction, particularly through the engagement of international students in these traditions. Rather than positioning Chinese culture as something to be merely observed, top Chinese universities frame it as a shared experience, inviting international students to actively participate. This dynamic is especially visible in visual representation of Chinese New Year celebrations. In the following section, I examined how PKU used visual storytelling to highlight international students as engaged cultural participants, reinforcing narratives of inclusivity and global connection.

### **Celebrating Chinese New Year as International Students at PKU**

In this section, I focus on a specific visual tweet shared by PKU to examine how it conveyed cultural participation and appreciation among international students. I chose PKU for



this section because of its deliberate emphasis on inclusive cultural practices, particularly its representation of international students engaging with traditional festivals like Chinese New Year. This visual (Figure 7), featuring students proudly showcasing self-written calligraphy scrolls, stood out to me as a strategic effort to frame cultural heritage as accessible and inviting to global audiences. Unlike posts highlighting passive observation of traditions, this visual emphasized active participation—international students were not merely spectators but co-creators of cultural meaning. International student participation in local traditions strengthen cross-cultural ties and project an image of inclusivity (Bislev, 2017; Lin & Chan, 2024). By analyzing the visual, I aimed to uncover how PKU employs visual storytelling to reframe cultural practices like calligraphy and festival rituals as instruments of cultural influence, fostering a sense of shared belonging while presenting China’s traditions as globally resonant.



**Figure 7: Image of the tweet on PKU’s X account (2024, February 8)**

In my analysis, this visual—a combination of three images—serves as a compelling representation of how PKU constructs cultural narratives on social media. The images depict

three international students celebrating the Chinese New Year, each proudly showcasing red Chinese calligraphy scrolls that they had written themselves. Eye-level framing fosters engagement by inviting audiences to relate to the subject on a personal level, reinforcing emotional connection (Danielson & Hedling, 2022). I found that the use of a direct, eye-level perspective plays a crucial role in shaping viewer identification. By positioning the viewer at the same level as the international students, this photographic technique, in my view, creates a sense of immediacy and connection. This framing invites the viewer into the scene as a participant rather than a distant observer, rather than simply consuming an image of cultural engagement. The visual positioning encourages the audience to identify with the students and feel as if they, too, are part of this celebration.

Through the tight framing of the images, PKU strategically centers the students and the red calligraphy scrolls, emphasizing these elements as key signifiers within the visual narrative. The scrolls, adorned with Chinese calligraphy, function as semiotic resources that carry embedded cultural meanings, representing the Spring Festival's core values—good luck, prosperity, and happiness. These signifiers are widely recognized within Chinese culture, but in this context, they are rearticulated through a cross-cultural lens. By featuring these scrolls so prominently, the images not only convey the traditional significance of the festival but also depict international students as active agents in the signifying practices of cultural engagement. Here, the visual discourse constructs an inclusive version of Chinese cultural identity, positioning it as something that can be learned, performed, and embraced by non-Chinese individuals. This corresponds with study on the role of international students as cultural mediators who, through active participation, contribute to the globalization of local traditions (Li et al., 2024). In this case, the representation of international students actively participating in

Chinese traditions reinforces the idea that cultural identity is fluid, participatory, and open to reinterpretation.

The representation of the students' diverse ethnicities further signifies PKU's effort to position itself as a globally engaged institution. To me, this aspect of the image serves a dual function: it not only showcases the university's internationalization efforts but also frames Chinese traditions as accessible and inclusive rather than exclusive. This echoes research on how universities employ multicultural visual narratives to enhance institutional branding and attract international students by projecting an image of openness and diversity (Pippert et al., 2013). The smiles on the students' faces, their direct eye contact with the camera, and the proud display of their calligraphy pieces work together to fix the meaning of the scene as one of positive cross-cultural interaction. The celebration of Chinese New Year is no longer framed as a purely local tradition; rather, it is constructed as a shared experience that international students can actively participate in and contribute to. Drawing from the concept of identification, I interpret these visual cues as encouraging a sense of belonging among both domestic and international audiences, reinforcing the idea that PKU is not only a Chinese university but a global site of cultural exchange.

In this way, Chinese universities strategically employ visual representation as a soft power mechanism—not simply to showcase their traditions but to construct an image of China as a welcoming and culturally rich nation. This connects to the broader discourse on educational diplomacy, where universities serve as agents of cultural transmission and ideological positioning. By showcasing international students actively participating in a key Chinese festival, PKU and other top Chinese universities position themselves as facilitators of global cultural dialogue rather than passive sites of academic learning. The blending of global and local

elements within this visual representation signifies an effort to normalize cultural hybridity, reinforcing the idea that Chinese culture can be a shared language through which students from around the world connect and find common ground. In my analysis, this not only strengthens PKU's institutional branding but also situates the university as an active participant in shaping global narratives of cultural inclusivity.

### **Ancient Artifacts at PKU**

A special subtheme that stood out to me in PKU's X/Twitter representation was the introduction of ancient artifacts located on the PKU campus. As one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in China, PKU boasts a rich history that is deeply intertwined with the nation's cultural and intellectual heritage. Founded in 1898, PKU's campus is not only an academic hub but also a cultural landmark, home to many ancient artifacts that reflect China's long-standing traditions and historical depth. I chose to focus on PKU in this section because unlike other universities, where cultural representation focused more on events or temporary activities, PKU's artifacts are permanent fixtures that physically and symbolically anchor its cultural narrative. PKU's historical and cultural significance sets it apart from other institutions. As a university with over a century of history, PKU has long been regarded as a symbol of China's intellectual and cultural revival, making its artifacts not just decorative elements but also powerful symbols of national identity. By analyzing PKU's approach, I aimed to uncover how these artifacts are strategically used to construct a narrative of cultural continuity and institutional pride.

PKU's use of historical artifacts in its social media representation serves as a deliberate strategy to position the university as a custodian of cultural heritage while reinforcing its institutional identity. Among the data I collected from PKU's X/Twitter, I found references to

artifacts such as the “stone tiger,” “stone tablets,” “stone fish sculpture,” “Danchi (Loong Cloud Marble),” “stone kylins,” “the twelve shichens,” and “the Ornamental Column.” These artifacts are particularly salient on PKU’s campus because they serve as signifiers of China’s past, linking the university to a broader historical and cultural narrative. To me, these objects do not simply reflect history; rather, they are actively constructed as meaningful through social mediation.

These tweets were accompanied by hashtags like #ABiteofHistory, #PKUTreasure, and #PKUTrivia, which, in my view, associated the tweets with a fixed discursive frame of cultural heritage and historical significance. I observed that the tweets focused on PKU’s historical artifacts by providing brief but informative contexts, introducing their locations, sizes, historical backgrounds, and aesthetic features. The images accompanying these tweets, which I found particularly captivating, prominently featured the artifacts themselves in various campus settings, often paired with their chocolate souvenir versions (see Figure 8). This interplay between textual and visual elements functions as a discursive strategy to naturalize PKU’s role as both a guardian of history and a modern, innovative institution. The combination of traditional artifacts with contemporary reinterpretations, such as chocolate versions, not only engages audiences but also reflects a branding effort that integrates historical signifiers into modern consumption practices.

Through these narratives, I observed that PKU used its historical artifacts to emphasize its deep-rooted cultural heritage, positioning itself as one of China’s most culturally significant institutions. By sharing these stories, PKU, in my view, told its audience about China’s rich cultural past, reinforcing its role as a guardian of national heritage. By sharing these stories, PKU, in my view, fixes the meaning of its institutional identity as deeply embedded in China’s intellectual and cultural legacy. The creation of artifact-themed chocolates stood out to me as an innovative signifying practice that merges tradition with modernity. I see this strategy as a way



**Figure 8: Screenshot of the tweet on PKU’s X account (2024, January 22)**  
 of encoding meaning into a consumable product, reinforcing cultural heritage through material

engagement. This blend of history and creativity, in my analysis, went beyond merely promoting PKU's brand; it illustrated a commitment to preserving and celebrating cultural heritage in a way that resonated with contemporary audiences. The approach of blending history and creativity reflects Amer's (2023) argument that cultural identity can be leveraged to enhance heritage value, resonating with PKU's efforts to encode meaning into consumable products. By doing so, I argue that PKU strengthened its reputation, using social media to project an image of a university that respected its past while engaging creatively with the present.

Building on my analysis of PKU's social media representation of artifacts, I examined how the university visually constructs its historical and cultural authority through images of campus landmarks, particularly the PKU gate. The careful presentation of artifacts like the stone lion in this image (see Figure 8), in my view, complemented the themes conveyed through the social media posts. Both the tweets and the visuals work together as signifying practices that communicate PKU's cultural depth and institutional prestige. By featuring these elements in a consistent manner, PKU, in my analysis, uses a multimodal approach to construct a coherent narrative of cultural continuity.

The image of the PKU gate (Figure 9) constructs a visually compelling narrative that reinforces the university's role as a site of historical and intellectual authority. Taken from a slightly low, straight-on angle, the composition fixes the stone lion as a dominant focal point, inviting the viewer to gaze upward, evoking a sense of grandeur and reverence. In my interpretation, the angle and positioning signify power and authority. The lion, a potent cultural signifier of guardianship, strength, and protection, was, in my view, intricately tied to PKU's identity as a steward of knowledge and tradition. It encodes an ideological representation of PKU as a historical and cultural guardian. In the background, traditional Chinese architectural





**Figure 9: Image of the tweet on PKU's X account (2023, December 23)**

elements such as decorated eaves, wooden pillars, and intricate patterns further anchor the image in a discursive framework of cultural continuity. The interplay of these elements with natural features like snowfall and soft lighting creates a contemplative aesthetic, reinforcing, in my observation, PKU's identity as both a historical site and a modern academic institution. The snow's quieting effect and the gentle light's subtle highlights lent an air of timelessness, emphasizing, in my view, PKU as a space where tradition and contemporary academic pursuits harmoniously converged.

From a broader perspective, I argue that this visual representation plays a significant role in China's soft power and cultural diplomacy. As Nakano and Zhu (2020) argued, cultural heritage can serve as a tool for projecting national values and fostering global admiration. By highlighting traditional symbols like the stone lion and classical architectural features, PKU



engaged in a representation that, in my view, tied into a broader narrative of China as a nation that values and preserves its cultural heritage. The image demonstrated, to me, not only the prestige of PKU but also the enduring nature of Chinese culture and history. By sharing images like this on social media, PKU's representation became, in my interpretation, a tool for cultural diplomacy, offering international audiences a view of China that emphasized continuity, tradition, and respect for history. It used visual storytelling, in my view, to create identification with China's intellectual and cultural depth, fostering a sense of curiosity and admiration among viewers. My visual analysis aligns with Shahjahan et al.'s (2020) visual analysis of Chinese universities' traditional cultural architecture, which suggests that such images attract a wide audience drawn to consume and engage with cultural experiences. This approach, I argue, helps shape positive perceptions of China's cultural richness and its commitment to preserving heritage while engaging with global audiences.

In this section, I discussed how PKU's representation of ancient artifacts highlights China's cultural heritage. In the next section, I discuss how the engagement of students with the BRI and technological advancements shifts the focus toward China's modern aspirations and global influence. This transition from historical preservation to future-oriented innovation demonstrates how top Chinese universities use social media to frame China as both a guardian of its heritage and a driver of global progress. In the following section, I provide an analysis of how top Chinese universities strategically represent international students' participation in these initiatives.

### **Engaging with BRI and Innovation**

Top Chinese universities strategically aligned their social media representation with China's national policies, particularly through the promotion of the BRI and showcasing China's

technological advancements. The BRI, often framed as a modern-day Silk Road, is not merely an economic initiative but also a cultural and civilizational project that revives historical narratives of connectivity and exchange. When international students are depicted participating in BRI-related activities, they become symbols of this renewed cultural exchange, embodying the initiative's vision of shared development and mutual understanding. Similarly, China's technological advancements are not just markers of economic progress but also cultural symbols of modernity and innovation. As Hartig (2016) noted, China's soft power strategies often emphasize a dual identity of tradition and modernity. By framing these themes within the context of cultural diplomacy, Chinese universities use the engagement of international students to project a vision of China that is both rooted in its rich cultural heritage and forward-looking in its global ambitions. This approach not only enhances China's soft power but also reinforces the idea that culture is not static but dynamic. Through these representations, Chinese universities contribute to a narrative of China as a global leader that values cultural exchange, technological progress, and shared development, thereby advancing its soft power goals on the global stage.

In this section, I provided textual analysis of tweets from ZJU and two visual analysis from tweets posted by THU and PKU, among four universities, SJTU is the only universities that did not post BRI-related tweets during period that my data was collected. I aim to unpack how top Chinese universities represented student engagement with the BRI and China's technological advancements through discourse and visuals to advance the country's soft power. representations collectively constructed the narrative of students' engagement in national progress while amplifying cultural diplomacy.

ZJU's representation of its contributions to the BRI on X/Twitter, in my view, exemplifies how discourse is strategically constructed to align the university with China's global

ambitions. Rather than simply providing institutional updates, these representations function as deliberate discursive strategies that frame China's role in global development as both natural and necessary. Drawing on CDA, I interpret these tweets as shaping how audiences perceive China's influence through the lens of higher education. In one tweet, ZJU particularly emphasized international students' engagement with the BRI, stating that students "have actively participated in the #BRI, witnessing its numerous advantages and displaying unwavering confidence in its potential" (ZJU, 2023, December 8). In my analysis, the lexical choices in this statement—such as "actively participated," "numerous advantages," and "unwavering confidence"—are not neutral descriptors but instead work to construct an authoritative and positive discourse around the BRI. My analysis on the lexical choices mirrors Shambaugh's (2013) observation that Chinese institutions often use aspirational language to frame national policies as universally beneficial. By framing student involvement in this way, the tweet does more than highlight participation; it fixes meaning around the BRI as a beneficial and widely embraced global project.

I find the inclusion of international students as active participants in the BRI particularly significant because it functions as a signifying practice that extends the initiative's legitimacy beyond China. This representation, in my view, serves to encode a carefully curated narrative—one that aligns foreign perspectives with China's global ambitions. Rather than presenting the BRI as a purely Chinese-led endeavor, the tweet strategically foregrounds international students' experiences, constructing an image of multilateral collaboration rather than unilateral expansion. The phrase "witnessing its numerous advantages" implies that the benefits of the BRI are not up for debate but are instead observable and self-evident. In my reading, this discursive framing limits alternative interpretations, such as critiques of the BRI's geopolitical implications or

concerns about economic dependency and instead naturalizes the initiative as an undisputed global good. By embedding these voices into its social media narrative, ZJU positions itself as both an academic institution and an ideological conduit for reinforcing China's vision of global connectivity.

Having analyzed ZJU's textual discourse on international student participation in the BRI, I now turn to a visual analysis of THU (Figure 10) and PKU (Figure 11) to explore how Chinese universities employ visuals to reinforce narratives of China's global influence and technological leadership. In my analysis, I demonstrated that the images do more than simply document student activities; they strategically construct aspirations related to technological progress, global leadership, and academic excellence. The presence of international students engaging with advanced Chinese infrastructure suggests that China is not only shaping its own future but also influencing the global trajectory of education and technological development.

Chinese universities use visual representations to construct an image of themselves as hubs of technological innovation and global engagement. By showcasing international students interacting with advanced infrastructure and cutting-edge technology, they project China as a leader in global education and scientific progress. In Figure 10, I noticed that a group of people is positioned in front of a high-speed train, holding a banner that reads "Tsinghua Global Youth Dialogue." The straight-on perspective places the students at the center, visually integrating them into China's technological future. The inclusion of a high-speed train is striking to me because it functions not just as a backdrop but as a powerful symbol of China's rapid advancement. As Zhao (2013) highlighted, infrastructure like high-speed trains is central to China's narrative of modernity and global leadership. Similarly, in Figure 11, international students are gathered around a partially assembled ZEEKR electric vehicle, standing in a semicircle while observing

the displayed technology. The slightly lower camera angle caught my attention as it emphasizes the complexity of the vehicle, making it appear larger and more advanced. From my perspective, these images operate as signifiers that work to fix the meaning around China's global positioning, reinforcing the narrative that these universities are at the forefront of global innovation.



**Figure 10: Screenshot of the tweet on THU's X account (2024, March 15)**

The images also position Chinese universities as spaces where international students actively engage with innovation, constructing an image of China as a global knowledge hub. In Figure 10, the well-lit, natural lighting combined with the students' relaxed yet coordinated poses creates a welcoming and open atmosphere. The smiles and casual postures give me the

impression that they are being presented as a unified and enthusiastic group, reinforcing a sense of camaraderie and shared experience. The presence of the high-speed train in the background further reinforces a sense of progress, tying their participation to China's larger infrastructural and technological advancements. Similarly, Figure 11 presents an exhibition space that appears sleek and modern, where students interact with an advanced electric vehicle. The bright lighting enhances the metallic sheen of the car, which, to me, underscores the narrative of China's sophistication in engineering and innovation. The students' attentive postures and facial expressions suggest curiosity and engagement, reinforcing the idea that they are actively learning from China's technological achievements. These visual elements convince me that Chinese universities are portraying themselves not just as places of academic learning but as essential contributors to global knowledge production and scientific innovation.

Beyond showcasing innovation, these images subtly communicate power dynamics that reinforce China's soft power strategy. They depict universities as spaces where international students come to learn from China's technological advancements. In Figure 10, the students standing in front of the high-speed train are positioned within a larger framework of progress and modernity. Their presence in the image suggests, to me, that China is offering international students access to its technological future, positioning itself as a leader rather than a follower in global innovation. Similarly, in Figure 11, the students' placement around the electric vehicle—combined with the slightly lower camera angle—makes them appear as engaged learners, looking toward the vehicle in apparent admiration. The depiction of students' admiration echoes Callahan's (2015) argument that such representations frame China as a "teacher" to the developing world and reinforced hierarchical power relations. To me, these images actively construct China's role as a dominant force in global education. The visual framing positions

China as a knowledge exporter, where international students are represented as recipients of Chinese technological expertise. This reinforces China's soft power strategy by fixing meanings that promote an image of China as a desirable and influential academic destination. In this sense, the representations contribute to a larger ideological project that seeks to redefine global knowledge hierarchies and reposition China as a central player in the global knowledge economy.



**Figure 11: Image of the tweet on PKU's X account (2024, February 9)**

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the strategic role of student engagement in China's cultural diplomacy as represented by top Chinese universities on X/Twitter. My analysis focused on how these universities frame student participation in academic, cultural, and extracurricular activities to advance China's soft power and position itself as a global leader. Through the use of visual

and textual signifying practices—such as hashtags, ancient artifacts and the depiction of student involvement in cultural and campus events—these institutions construct a narrative of cultural exchange, student engagement, and institutional prestige.

When comparing the representations across four institutions, several similarities and differences emerge. All universities strategically showcase student engagement in cultural activities and global initiatives. A common thread is their focus on portraying student engagement in cultural traditions and campus activities, such as the celebration of Chinese festivals and the participation in sports competitions. However, notable differences exist in how each university emphasizes certain aspects of student engagement. For instance, PKU has a particular focus on ancient artifacts and historical landmarks which sets it apart by framing its identity through its rich cultural heritage. In contrast, other universities focus more on showcasing student participation in contemporary events and technological developments.

Looking ahead, in the next chapter, I will shift my focus to how these universities engage in international partnerships, exploring how their global alliances amplify their efforts in constructing a world-class university identity. Specifically, I will analyze how these universities represent their global partnerships on social media space and leverage these partnerships to enhance their academic reputations and extend China's influence on the global stage.



## CHAPTER 6: THE POWER OF GLOBAL ALLIANCES

In the previous two chapters, my analysis focused primarily on how top Chinese universities represent their research accomplishments and students' engagement in campus activities on social media, with particular attention to Chinese cultural activities. In this chapter, my focus shifts to how top Chinese universities represent their global alliances, in other words, their global partnerships and international collaborations with other world-class institutions and organizations. Through my process of organizing and coding data collected, top Chinese universities' global partnerships and collaborations stand out as a significant recurring theme. In the context of higher education, international partnership is defined as a formal alliance between institutions in different countries which typically involves agreements that allow for joint programs, student and faculty exchanges, co-hosted events, or shared research initiatives (Ayoubi & Al-Habaibeh, 2006). International collaboration is defined as the cooperation between universities, research institutions, or other organizations across different countries to work on shared projects (Shin et al., 2013). Universities around the world are striving to internationalize themselves and international collaborations and partnerships have become a trend in the process of higher education internationalization (De Wit & Merckx, 2022). As China has a strong aspiration to build world-class universities, top Chinese universities are actively engaging in its internationalization efforts, particularly through encouraging studying abroad, promoting transnational programs, and using English as a medium for teaching and learning (Guo, et al., 2022). Therefore, in this chapter, I explore how the theme of global alliances has been represented on top Chinese universities' X/Twitter.

In this chapter, I analyze how top Chinese universities strategically construct and reinforce the meaning of global partnerships and collaborations on X/Twitter through signifying

practices that project institutional prestige and global partnerships. These signifying practices include group photos of leadership meetings, the depiction of student as global ambassadors, visual cues such as emojis and institutional logos, and the framing of ping pong as the symbol of peace and collaboration. Through these signifying practices, I argue that top Chinese universities strategically use X/Twitter to construct an image of global leadership through representations of international partnerships, while simultaneously reproducing and obscuring entrenched hierarchies in global higher education and revealing their ongoing struggle for legitimacy and recognition within an international system historically dominated by Western institutions. Through multimodal analysis, the most salient representation in this chapter is the visual comparison of global collaborations. Partnerships with elite Western institutions are depicted through formal group photos that emphasize diplomatic protocol, while collaborations with non-Western partners appear in informal settings featuring shared meals and circular seating. These two contrasting visual styles construct a sense of equality in collaborations while masking underlying asymmetries and positioning Chinese universities as global leaders across diverse geopolitical contexts.

I begin by introducing the background of China's efforts to expand international collaborations to provide context for my data analysis. I then examine how ZJU and SJTU constructed leadership-driven partnerships through visuals and institutional narratives to project prestige, influence, and academic authority on the global stage. Next, I explore student participation in global partnerships, analyzing how THU positioned its students as globally minded leaders through international exchanges and industry visits, while PKU strategically represented historical narratives like "Ping-pong Diplomacy" to highlight students' roles in international relations. Throughout my analysis, I critically assess the implications of these

representations, considering their role in China's world-class university building and their potential to reinforce or challenge existing academic hierarchies.

### **The Expansion of China's Global University Partnerships**

Encouraged by China's central government, the trend of expanding international collaborations and partnerships is particularly evident among top Chinese universities. These partnerships are considered essential for elevating the quality of Chinese higher education, attracting global resources, and driving innovation to promote China's international standing in the global higher education landscape (Li, 2005; Willis, 2006). This push is deeply rooted in governmental policies, notably the "Double First-Class" initiative (Ministry of Education, 2022). These collaborations are seen as essential for accessing advanced knowledge, driving research, and positioning Chinese institutions as leaders in a neoliberal higher education environment (Sakamoto & Chapman, 2011; Zhuang, 2009).

The motivations behind these partnerships are multifaceted, blending academic, economic, and geopolitical goals. Universities worldwide are seeking collaborations with prestigious institutions to improve their international reputation and global rankings, and Chinese universities are no exception (Chan, 2004). These partnerships attract international students, contributing significant revenue while facilitating student and faculty mobility to foster cultural exchange and global perspectives vital for China's development (Li, 2005). Global university rankings also play a significant role in partner selection, and as a result, Chinese universities particularly select top-ranked universities for partnerships and these universities are predominantly "western" (Locke, 2014; Ma & Ploner, 2023, p. 1461). Partnerships with prestigious universities in the West reflect a preference for institutions perceived as equals or superiors in reputation and influence. However, this Western-centric approach has sparked

debate about equity in global educational networks, potentially sidelining opportunities with non-Western peers (Ma & Ploner, 2023).

China's international partnerships also align with broader governmental strategies, especially the BRI (Jiang & Shi, 2019). For instance, the BRI's Education Action Plan, introduced in 2017, promotes cooperation with universities in the Global South, exemplified by initiatives like the University Alliance of the Silk Road, which unites over 130 universities across 32 countries (Belt and Road Portal, 2017). These collaborations enhance China's soft power, supporting its ambition to build educational bridges and extend its geopolitical reach (Peters, 2019). Underpinning these efforts is the "Chinese dream," articulated by President Xi Jinping as a vision of national rejuvenation, economic prosperity, and global leadership (Jiang & Shi, 2019). In higher education, this translates into creating a world-class system that produces globally competitive talent and elevates China's influence (Wu, 2014). Partnerships with Western universities provide access to cutting-edge knowledge and improve rankings, while BRI collaborations amplify China's educational diplomacy, aligning with economic and social development goals (Peters, 2019). As Chinese universities continue to forge partnerships with globally prestigious institutions, they not only advance their own academic and research capabilities but also contribute to China's emergence as a leading player in global higher education.

This background provides a necessary foundation for understanding the role of global partnerships in Chinese universities' efforts to build world-class universities. With this contextual understanding, in the following sections, I will present my findings on how top Chinese universities represent this theme in their tweets.

## **ZJU and SJTU's Leadership-centric Representation in Global Partnerships**




In previous chapters, my analysis of X/Twitter representations has primarily focused on faculty and students. In this section, I shift my focus to the representation of institutional leadership's role in international collaborations and partnerships. University leaders—such as presidents, deans, and senior administrators—are often the main drivers of strategic global initiatives, negotiating agreements, establishing long-term alliances, and representing the institution's vision on the world stage. To illustrate this leadership-centric representation, I have chosen to focus on ZJU and SJTU in this section. Both universities provide rich examples for analysis because their tweets prominently feature institutional collaborations and global partnerships through leadership engagement. In contrast, THU and PKU tend to frame this theme through student participation in global partnerships, which I will discuss in later sections. By analyzing how ZJU and SJTU frame their leadership's participation in international partnerships, I aim to reveal the strategic role that institutional branding, language, and visuals play in positioning Chinese universities as influential global actors. In the following section, I will first discuss my analysis of the tweet content, patterns, and linguistic choices that ZJU and SJTU use to frame their roles in global partnerships. Then, in the second section, I will shift my focus to a visual analysis by shedding light on how visuals shape top Chinese universities' identities in global partnerships.

### ***Narratives of International Collaboration***

In my analysis of ZJU and SJTU's social media representations, I found that both universities strategically frame their leadership's international engagements to project an image of institutional prestige, global relevance, and academic influence. This finding aligns with research demonstrating that university branding is an increasingly important tool for global

engagement (Bamberger, et al., 2020). As I observed, a significant number of their tweets focus on high-level delegations, institutional visits, and long-term partnerships. ZJU frequently highlights leadership visits to prestigious universities and organizations across the U.S. (Columbia, MIT, Cornell), Japan (Osaka University), the U.K. (University of Edinburgh, Imperial College London, University College London), and the European Union (United Nations, International Atomic Energy Agency, and multiple European universities). Meanwhile, SJTU's tweets showcase leadership participation in major global academic and policy events, such as the 2024 PIR Summit in Davos, where the Dean of Antai College spoke about “sustainable development and the evolution of business education” (SJTU, 2024, January 21). These representations position ZJU and SJTU as active participants in global academic networks, reflecting their strategic effort to be recognized as influential institutions in international higher education.

As I examined these tweets, I noticed that ZJU and SJTU do not simply list institutional partnerships; rather, they construct a strategic narrative that emphasizes their active role in shaping international collaboration. The language used in these tweets—phrases such as “mutual goals,” “talent cultivation,” and “strategic impact”—functions as a discursive strategy to position these universities as integral actors in shaping global academic collaboration. The consistency of these phrases across both universities suggests a broader discourse that Chinese universities are collaborative partners rather than competitors. The strategic narrative aligns with studies on the use of language in university branding, where institutions strategically adopt terminology that resonates with international stakeholders (Tang, 2015). However, scholars like Xu (2023) caution that overemphasizing Western academic partnerships may reinforce a global hierarchy where Chinese universities are still perceived as needing Western validation.

I also observed that both universities use visual elements to strengthen this narrative. ZJU, for instance, incorporates emojis— (handshake) for partnerships,  (hospital) for medical collaborations, and  (professionals) for academic engagement—to make tweets more engaging while maintaining a professional tone. Meanwhile, SJTU frequently posts formal images of leadership meetings, group photos, and signing ceremonies (Figure 12) to demonstrate institutional prestige. This strategic use of visuals aligns with Constantinou's (2018) concept of "visual diplomacy," where imagery is used to construct narratives of legitimacy and influence. By positioning leadership figures at the forefront of these images, Chinese universities leverage symbolic representations to solidify their standing in global academia. For example, a tweet featuring the President of the University of Michigan's visit to SJTU included carefully staged meeting images, highlighting discussions on "enhancing international exchanges, talent development, and multi-level cooperation" (SJTU, 2024, February 4). I found that these choices serve semiotic functions. For instance, the handshake emoji acts as a symbolic signifier of agreement and partnership, while group photos reinforce the universities' legitimacy by aligning them with globally recognized institutions. The mode in these images where leadership is visually positioned as central suggests a deliberate attempt to establish authority within the global higher education landscape. To me, the choice of these visuals and linguistic framing suggests that both universities are not only showcasing their achievements but also constructing an institutional identity that aligns with dominant global academic norms and projecting themselves as central players in global higher education.

Beyond highlighting leadership visits, ZJU and SJTU also strategically emphasize the depth and longevity of their international partnerships. From my perspective, this is an important distinction because it shifts the narrative from short-term visibility to long-term global



**Figure 12: Image of the tweet on SJTU's X account (2024, February 4)**

integration. ZJU frequently highlights high-impact collaborations in healthcare and technology, such as joint research with the National Heart Centre Singapore on cardiovascular diseases and its partnership with Indonesia's National Cardiovascular Center in cardiology (ZJU, 2023, December 1). Meanwhile, SJTU places a strong emphasis on its 30-year collaboration with Singapore, culminating in the launch of the Antai Asia-Pacific Center (SJTU, 2024, December 18). The repeated emphasis on long-standing relationships conveys an image of stability and credibility, which is particularly important in the competitive global higher education landscape (Maresova et al., 2020). Furthermore, both universities showcase their engagement through collaborative education. ZJU, for example, underscores its role in training petrochemical professionals through a partnership with Universiti Brunei Darussalam and Hengyi Group, while SJTU highlights its collaborative PhD program with Warwick University, branding it as an initiative that fosters



“diverse research” and connects students with “world-class faculty” (SJTU, 2023, December 19).

While analyzing these tweets, I noticed that ZJU and SJTU do more than just document their institutional partnerships—they also use their social media presence to assert themselves as thought leaders in global higher education. This became particularly clear in the ways SJTU’s tweets framed their leadership’s participation in international forums. A key example is the 2024 PIR Summit in Davos, where SJTU’s language emphasized its leadership role with phrases like “shaping the future of business education” and “advancing sustainable practices”. Such rhetoric positions SJTU as an institution that not only follows global academic trends but actively shapes them. ZJU adopts a similar strategy by emphasizing its global research leadership. In many of its tweets, ZJU frequently highlights its focus on “talent cultivation,” “strategic impact,” and “joint research”, signaling that it is not merely adopting international models but actively contributing to global academic discourse. This self-representation strengthens its appeal to prospective students, faculty, and research partners, demonstrating that ZJU is not just participating in global academia—it is helping to define it.

Reflecting on my analysis, it is clear that ZJU and SJTU’s social media strategies go beyond mere publicity; they serve as strategic tools for positioning themselves within the global academic hierarchy. By consistently showcasing high-profile partnerships, leadership engagements, and long-term collaborations, these universities craft a compelling narrative of institutional prestige, research excellence, and global integration. Their deliberate use of language and visuals amplifies their credibility, attracting students, faculty, and funding opportunities. At the same time, I recognize that these representations are not just about institutional branding—they also contribute to a broader geopolitical discourse. By emphasizing “shared values” and “mutual goals”, ZJU and SJTU align themselves with a collaborative, non-

competitive global image, countering Western narratives that often depict China's rise as a challenge to the existing global order (Weiss & Wallace, 2021). As Kohli (2023) observed, China has used higher education collaborations as a means of expanding its soft power, using educational partnerships to foster long-term diplomatic and economic relationships. However, Fedasiuk et al. (2022) suggested that these collaborations also raise security concerns in Western countries, particularly in fields related to technology and research development. This duality suggests that while Chinese universities present themselves as cooperative global actors, their increasing influence is viewed with both admiration and skepticism depending on geopolitical interests.

Despite their efforts to establish themselves as global peers, their continued emphasis on elite Western partnerships suggests that Chinese universities are still measured against Western-centric benchmarks of academic excellence. As Montgomery (2016) argues, this could reinforce the perception that Chinese higher education remains in a "catching-up" phase rather than asserting its own independent model of academic leadership. That said, these representations are not without tangible benefits. As Zhang et al. (2022) highlight, international partnerships enhance research output, strengthen academic networks, and facilitate knowledge exchange, and ZJU and SJTU's social media presence directly contributes to this process. Their representations signal a growing confidence in engaging with the global higher education landscape—not just as participants, but as institutions shaping the future of international academia. Moving forward, it will be interesting to see whether Chinese universities can expand their narrative beyond Western partnerships and assert a more autonomous global academic identity—one that is recognized on its own terms rather than through the lens of existing Western standards.

### *Visualizing Leadership in Global Partnerships*

Beyond the content and the pattern of the tweets, I found the visuals in the tweets add a compelling layer to the universities' representation. These images do not merely illustrate event, but they shape perceptions and reinforce the intended narrative of each institution's global standing. In this section I provide analyze of two visuals posted by SJTU (Figure 12) and ZJU (Figure 13).

Figure 12 highlighted the visit of the President of the University of Michigan to SJTU. In this image, I observed that the photo was taken from a slightly elevated, straight-on angle down the length of a conference table, allowing each participant to be fully visible. I noticed that this perspective emphasized the inclusivity of the gathering, as all individuals were represented within the frame. I saw that the moderate distance maintained formality, neither too intimate nor too distant, preserving the professionalism expected in such an official context. By centering the viewpoint along the table's axis, I found that the image achieved symmetry, which suggested balance and equality among participants.

However, when I looked more closely, I noticed that the positioning of certain individuals at the table's far end subtly conveyed authority, likely indicating their roles as key figures in the discussion. In the background, I noted the prominent display of the "Joint Institute" logo, flanked by the University of Michigan and SJTU logos. I found that this arrangement not only reinforced the institutional collaboration central to the meeting but also served as a visual reminder of the shared purpose: fostering international partnerships. I suggested that the thoughtful positioning of participants and institutional logos strengthened the image's focus on unity, showcasing a collaborative spirit that underscored the importance of the two universities working together.

In addition, I found that the image projected an idealized vision of global academia united in pursuit of shared goals. By situating representatives of two prominent institutions together, I suggested that the photo signaled a commitment to bridging cultural and educational divides and aimed to elevate the universities' international standing. In doing so, I observed that the image constructed an identification with the global academic elite, appealing to audiences who valued international partnership and mutual development. I would argue that this representation of collaboration aligned with Adams et al.'s (2022) research, which highlighted that China's substantial investment in international partnerships had become increasingly impactful, offering mutual benefits for the institutions involved.

Nevertheless, it is important for me to note, as Ng and Nyland (2018) argued, that the current political climate between China and Western countries and evolving regulations in the international education market posed significant challenges to maintaining responsive and collaborative planning efforts. In addition, as Adams et al. pointed out, the focus on Western countries and specific technology areas rather than subjects that China itself needed to develop suggested a strategic prioritization. I recognized that this imbalance shaped the nature of joint initiatives, often privileging Western institutional agendas over those of their Chinese counterparts. By presenting a balanced and harmonious visual narrative, I found that the image masked these deeper inequities, reinforcing a narrative of unity while concealing the uneven distribution of power and influence within the global academic landscape.

The second image (Figure 13) depicted the collaboration between ZJU School of Medicine and Indonesia's National Cardiovascular Center. As I examined this image, I noticed that it was taken from a slightly lower angle, looking up at the group of individuals. This viewpoint, to me, gave the subjects a sense of importance and authority, as if they were standing

tall and looking forward to the future. I felt that it conveyed a feeling of ambition and forward momentum, which aligned with the theme of expanding cooperation in cardiology. I saw that the group of individuals was prominently placed in the foreground, with a strong emphasis on their collective presence. Their diverse attire, ranging from formal suits to medical uniforms, stood out to me as a visual representation of the interdisciplinary nature of the collaboration.



**Figure 13: Image of the tweet on ZJU's X account (2023, November 30)**

I also observed that, in Figure 13, the mood of the image was celebratory and collaborative. The participants were smiling and appeared relaxed, which I interpreted as conveying a sense of camaraderie and mutual respect. I found the “love” gesture, formed by the hands to create a heart shape, particularly striking. I recognized this gesture as a symbol of affection, care, and emotional connection. In the context of this image, I saw that the gesture transcended professional boundaries, adding a layer of emotional warmth and personal

investment to the collaboration between the two institutions. This finding aligned with Ma and Montgomery's (2021) study, which highlighted the significance of interpersonal relationships, particularly among senior academics, in developing and sustaining partnerships in international collaborations in higher education. As I analyzed the image, I noticed that senior scholars from both countries were depicted making the "love" gesture, symbolizing the strong interpersonal bonds between them. This representation suggested to me the potential for a sustainable and fruitful collaboration.

In the context of the images provided by top Chinese universities on X/Twitter, I observed that the representation of international collaborations was a strategic act of identity formation. I recognized that these images did not just depict events; they actively constructed the identity of the universities as global leaders and partners in significant international ventures. I found that these images reflected power dynamics in how Chinese universities positioned themselves as leading partners in global collaborations. The careful staging of group photos, formal settings, and symbolic gestures (like the handshake or heart symbol) suggested to me a deliberate attempt to project an image of equality, leadership, and global influence. Through these images, I noticed that Chinese universities were not just participants in international collaborations; they were leaders, capable of shaping global discourses on critical issues like clean energy and medical innovation. I also observed how the visual narratives in these images appealed to desires for recognition, legitimacy, and prestige in the global academic community. By associating themselves with internationally recognized institutions and global challenges, I found that these universities sought to construct an image that resonated with the aspirations of international audiences. However, Xu (2023) warned that such branding strategies can reinforce existing global hierarchies, particularly when universities overemphasize partnerships with elite

Western institutions while neglecting their unique academic and cultural contributions.

While institutional leadership plays a central role in shaping international collaborations, students are also key actors in global partnerships, serving as active participants in international engagement. The emphasis on leadership-driven partnerships, as seen in the cases of ZJU and SJTU, constructs a narrative of institutional prestige and strategic global positioning. However, global partnership is not solely about formal agreements and high-level diplomacy; it is also about how students experience, contribute to, and embody these global connections. In contrast to universities that highlight leadership, THU and PKU adopt a student-centric approach to representing their international partnerships, positioning students as the future leaders of global collaboration. In the next section, I examine how THU and PKU frame student participation as part of the institution's global partnership, with THU emphasizing global citizenship and cross-cultural exchange and PKU's representation on Ping-pong Diplomacy to highlight sports-based international relations.

### **Students as Global Ambassadors in Global Partnerships**

Unlike leadership-driven narratives that emphasize diplomacy and strategic agreements, student participation in global partnership offers a more personal and experiential dimension. Through their involvement in academic exchanges, industry visits, and diplomatic activities, students act as ambassadors of their institutions and their home countries. Their engagement not only enhances their own educational and professional development but also serves as a strategic tool for universities to showcase their role in fostering international cooperation and talent cultivation (Wojciuk et al., 2015).

This section differs from my previous chapter on student engagement in China's cultural diplomacy, which focused on how students represent and promote Chinese culture as part of a

broader national soft power strategy. Here, I shift my focus to students as participants in international partnerships, emphasizing mutual exchange, academic cooperation, and cross-border engagement. While cultural diplomacy centers on projection and influence, global partnerships highlight shared learning and cooperation that position students as integral to global partnerships.

In this section, I explore how top Chinese universities strategically highlight student participation in global partnerships, focusing on two distinct approaches: THU that emphasizes student mobility and leadership development through international experiences, and PKU that draws on historical narratives, such as Ping-Pong Diplomacy, to position students as diplomatic representatives on the global stage.

### ***Cultivating Global Citizens at THU***

THU takes a distinct approach by spotlighting its students' international experiences within the framework of the partnerships that THU has built. THU's tweets about its students' global experiences are equally strategic in positioning the university as a hub for cultivating future global leaders. By showcasing students participating in events like company visits and sustainability forums abroad, THU highlights its commitment to support the development of students' cross-cultural awareness and leadership skills. This discourse aligns with China's vision of cultivating internationally minded citizens (Wu, 2014). International student mobility also fosters intercultural competence, mutual understanding, and professional skills essential for global leadership (Lomer, 2017). Through these representations, THU positions itself as a global player while constructing a narrative that its students are prepared to contribute meaningfully to a globalized world.

My closer examination of THU's tweets reveals the deliberate ways in which students'



international experiences are framed. I found that THU's tweets feature students traveling to Argentina and Chile to "witness the world's diversity while showing an authentic China" to local communities (THU, 2024, March 29). This wording is significant—it suggests that these student visits are not simply about cross-cultural learning but also about performing a specific national identity. Other tweets reveal students engaged in company visits and youth exchanges in Indonesia, where they explore local industry practices while also sharing insights from their own academic and cultural backgrounds (THU, 2024, March 23). I also observed tweets about students exploring the China-Saudi partnership in life sciences and digital technology (THU, 2024, March 23), visiting the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to discuss environmental protection and sustainable development (THU, 2024, March 11), and engaging in cooperative exchanges in Serbia and Turkey to understand university-industry collaborations there (THU, 2024, March 10). These representations resonate with the framework of global citizenship education, which aims to develop students' abilities to engage with complex global issues, recognize interdependence, and foster a sense of responsibility toward global communities (Oxley & Morris, 2013). By mapping out these engagements across diverse regions—including Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, Japan, and Kenya—THU constructs a representation of its extensive global influence while simultaneously framing its students as global citizens who actively engage in cross-cultural exchanges.

What struck me in these posts was the level of detail in the text descriptions, which provided context on the themes, objectives, and specific roles that THU representatives and students played in each event. THU's posts emphasize that these experiences are not only educational but also encourage international cooperation and promote a mutual understanding of global issues. THU often centers on the concept of students as "cultural carriers" or "authentic

representations of China.” The language in these tweets emphasizes terms like “authentic China” and “vivid cultural ambassadors,” framing students’ international experiences as an extension of China’s cultural diplomacy efforts. THU’s emphasis on students engaging “with news media and universities abroad” to showcase an “authentic China” serves as a strategic way to depict the students as more than academic participants—they are cultural emissaries. The use of languages here aligns with scholars who have argued that global citizenship education is often intertwined with national interests (Shultz, 2007; Torres, 2017) with the tendency to reinforce hierarchical global relations—where students from elite institutions are positioned as agents of change while others are recipients of knowledge (Stein, 2021).

The accompanying visuals add another layer to the narrative, displaying students listening to presentations, participating in discussions, and interacting in group settings, which brings these experiences to life and visually contextualizes the textual information.

Through these observations, THU intentionally positioning itself as a university that provides diverse, hands-on opportunities for students to engage in global experiences. The tweets highlight how THU actively supports student participation in international forums, industry site visits, cultural exchanges, and sustainability initiatives. Each of these opportunities, as I interpreted it, serves not only as an educational experience but also to develop students’ global awareness and leadership skills.

A tweet from THU stated, “‘China-Saudi collaboration in future-oriented industries has expanded from single-enterprise trade to full industry.’ From talent training to full industry chain solutions, #NextGen witnessed fruitful collaboration in life sciences and digital tech.” This tweet, along with Figure 14, showcased the expanding scope of China-Saudi collaboration, emphasizing a shift from single-enterprise trade to comprehensive industry-wide partnerships. I

noticed that the tweet highlighted talent training and the development of full industry chain solutions, particularly in life sciences and digital technology, as key aspects of this growing collaboration. The accompanying image visually represented this partnership through a communal gathering, with participants seated in a circle. In my interpretation, by featuring students' participation in the institution's global partnerships, the tweet and image together demonstrated the role of students in shaping the future of this collaboration.



**Figure 14: Image of the tweet on THU's X account (2024, March 23)**

As I interpreted the image, I observed the visual as the representation of the deepening collaboration between China and Saudi Arabia. In my visual analysis, the visual conveyed a narrative of inclusivity, partnership, and cultural exchange. The slightly elevated viewpoint and circular seating arrangement immediately drew my attention to the equal representation of all participants, signaling that everyone was valued equally in this gathering. The circular formation emphasized interconnectedness. However, when I compared the China-Saudi gathering with the

China-US leadership meeting (Figure 12), I noticed a stark contrast in how authority was structured. The leadership meetings in Chinese universities followed a long rectangular table format, which I interpreted as reinforcing a more structured and hierarchical approach to discussions. The spatial arrangement positioned authority figures at central or elevated positions, shaping the flow of dialogue in a top-down manner. This reflects traditional Confucian hierarchical structures in China, where power and seniority dictate social order (Hall & Ames, 1987). In contrast, the Saudi gathering appeared more equal and informal, with participants sitting on the ground in a circular arrangement, I believe that this could foster a more relaxed atmosphere and encourage open dialogue.

As I analyzed the foreground, my focus shifted to the shared space of food and beverages, which symbolized hospitality and mutual respect—an essential foundation for international collaborations. This communal aspect set a welcoming and informal tone, creating a sense of trust and shared purpose. I observed that hospitality played a central role in shaping the atmosphere of the China-Saudi gathering. As Derrida (2000) argued, hospitality is more than a social ritual; it is a form of power, shaping relationships between hosts and guests and structuring the nature of engagements. I noticed how the presence of food and beverages in a communal space reflected the cultural emphasis on relationship-building, mutual respect, and informal dialogue. This aligned with both Middle Eastern and Chinese traditions, where business and diplomacy often incorporated elements of personal connection and trust-building through shared meals. However, in the China-US leadership meeting (Figure 12), the representation of hospitality was minimal. The table was primarily set with documents and notebooks depicting a focus on formal, goal-oriented discussions. This difference highlighted a cultural distinction—while Western-styled meetings and formal Chinese academic discussions often prioritized

professionalism, while Saudi Arabian gatherings integrated social bonding as an essential part of collaboration.

Furthermore, I analyzed that the lighting feels natural and balanced, illuminating every participant equally. I notice how the brightness enhances the colors of the food and the vibrant patterns in the room, creating a celebratory atmosphere. The body language of the participants, with their relaxed posture and close proximity, reflects comfort, trust, and engagement. I found the inclusion of students particularly significant, as their presence signals a commitment to talent development and mentorship. This aligns with the tweet's focus on #NextGen and suggests that the collaboration is not just about immediate outcomes but also about cultivating future leaders who will carry these partnerships forward. What stood out to me is how the image portrays students not as passive observers but as active participants in the discussion. Their integration into this setting reflects the value placed on education and capacity building, which I observed as a critical part of long-term sustainability in international collaborations. It is clear to me that this representation emphasizes the human element of partnerships, suggesting that strong relationships are built through mutual respect and shared experiences, rather than through purely formal or transactional interactions.

However, while the image projects an ideal of mutual respect and collective advancement, a deeper examination reveals complexities and tensions that merit critical reflection. The image's symbolic representation of equality invites questions about the power dynamics underlying such collaborations. As Montgomery (2016) argued, transnational partnerships do not always develop uniformly but are influenced by geographical and sociocultural factors that can reinforcing existing inequalities. While the circular arrangement and informal setting suggest a level playing field, these visual cues may obscure the structural

inequalities often present in global partnerships. For example, the inclusion of students as participants is a positive step toward fostering intergenerational engagement, but their actual agency in decision-making processes remains ambiguous. Are they genuinely contributing to the shaping of the collaboration, or are they primarily symbolic participants included to project an image of inclusivity? This ambiguity points to the need for greater transparency in the roles and contributions of various stakeholders, particularly in collaborations that claim to prioritize talent development and long-term sustainability.

The emphasis on cultural exchange, as symbolized by the shared meal and the traditional setting, underscores the relational foundation of such collaborations. It aligns with contemporary shifts in global higher education and industries, where partnerships are increasingly seen as multidimensional endeavors that blend technical expertise with cultural sensitivity. However, these symbolic portrayals can sometimes mask underlying complexities, such as unequal access to resources, imbalances in decision-making power, or differing national agendas. In the context of this China-Saudi collaboration, for instance, the power asymmetries between the two nations in terms of economic and geopolitical influence could shape the nature and outcomes of the partnership in ways that are not immediately visible in the image. This critique resonates with Zhang and Kinser's (2016) argument that international collaborations in higher education are fraught with risks, particularly due to cultural differences and the liability of foreignness. The liability of foreignness highlights how external organizations often face heightened scrutiny and struggle to establish local legitimacy. Legitimacy is crucial for securing resources and ensuring sustainability, while a lack of it can erode social support, significantly increasing the likelihood of failure. These dynamics underscore the need to critically examine the power relations and legitimacy struggles embedded in such international partnerships, which are often masked by

surface-level portrayals of harmony and cooperation. Similarly, as Hodzi and Amoah put (2023), while the collaboration between China and Saudi is considered South-South cooperation based on principles of equality, mutual benefit, solidarity and no conditionality (Niu, 2013), China's ambition of increasing its global influence is taking the place of the Global North in its relations with other Global South countries.

The China-Saudi gathering highlights both the opportunities and complexities of international collaborations, showcasing inclusivity and cultural exchange while also raising questions about underlying power dynamics. The contrast between the China-Saudi model and the structured, hierarchical format of China-US leadership meetings reveals how different cultural and geopolitical contexts shape global partnerships. These visual representations are not just symbolic but serve as strategic tools for universities to position themselves internationally. Building on this idea, in the next section, I will explore how PKU used ping-pong used as a historical and cultural bridge to frame itself in global partnerships with the U.S.

### ***“Ping-pong Diplomacy” as Represented by PKU***

Among the four universities, PKU stood out by featuring its students' active participation in Sino-U.S. relations, particularly through the 52nd anniversary of “Ping-pong Diplomacy” amid the current geopolitical tensions between China and the United States. Although student engagement is significant in the representation of “Ping-pong diplomacy”, this section fits more appropriately within institutions' global partnership because it primarily highlights PKU's role in international diplomacy. While students are featured in the event, their participation serves as a vehicle for the university's diplomatic and geopolitical positioning. The framing of “Ping-pong Diplomacy” in PKU's tweets goes beyond showcasing student involvement in cultural or extracurricular activities. Instead, it strategically aligns PKU with China's foreign policy

strategies.

In my analysis, I observed that PKU's tweets commemorated this historic event through images and narratives that emphasized the role of sports in diplomacy, the legacy of cultural exchange, and the university's dedication to fostering understanding between two significant global powers. By focusing on themes of historical ties, cultural exchange, and "friendship," I found that PKU's use of "Ping-pong Diplomacy" went beyond a simple commemoration. It situated the university as an active participant in China's diplomatic landscape, utilizing the legacy of sports diplomacy to reinforce China's image as a peace-promoting nation. This approach aligned with state narratives that emphasized cultural and diplomatic engagement over political confrontation. I interpreted PKU's framing of sports as a "cultural bridge" as an indication that the university believed meaningful relationships between nations could be built on mutual respect and cultural understanding, reinforcing the idea that China was a global collaborator rather than a competitor. The historical diplomatic successes continue to serve as frameworks for shaping contemporary international relations and reinforcing peaceful engagement (Wójciuk et al., 2015)

This strategic framing was evident in PKU's tweets about the anniversary celebration held at the Chinese Embassy in Washington, D.C., where students and coaches participated in symbolic exchanges reminiscent of the original "Ping-pong Diplomacy" era (PKU, 2024, January 2). The tweet highlighted the coach's comments on how these exchanges allowed Chinese and American students to build friendships and broaden their horizons. The coach, quoted in the tweet, argued that the sport had helped young players not only improve their skills but also build meaningful connections. She expressed hope that the tour would promote friendship and peace between the two nations, a sentiment that resonated strongly in the context



of these events (PKU, 2024, January 2). I noticed that PKU employed a distinct rhetorical strategy by invoking historical and cultural narratives. In tweets commemorating “Ping-pong Diplomacy,” the university used terms like “symbol,” “#friendship,” and “cultural bridge” to evoke the deep-rooted diplomatic ties between China and the United States. By framing table tennis as “not only a sport but a bridge between the people of China and the United States,” PKU carefully crafted an image of itself as a longstanding cultural ambassador between nations. I interpreted this rhetorical strategy as a deliberate effort to convey a message of peace and understanding.

The visual elements in these tweets were particularly compelling and further reinforced this narrative. In Figure 15, I observed a group photo with students and diplomats from both nations, framed by the flags of China and the U.S. This vibrant visual suggested the symbolism of sports as a bridge for diplomacy and collaboration. Additionally, the photos of the athletes posing together after matches captured a sense of camaraderie and mutual respect. These visuals brought the text to life, creating a narrative that demonstrated how sports could transcend political divides and bring people together. PKU’s emphasis on “Ping-pong Diplomacy” on X/Twitter seemed strategic. By commemorating this historic breakthrough, PKU reminded both domestic and international audiences of the longstanding role of cultural exchange in thawing political tensions—a point particularly relevant given current U.S.-China relations. I interpreted this focus as a subtle diplomatic gesture, suggesting that positive cultural interactions, especially among young people, continued to be essential in promoting peace and understanding.

A closer analysis of Figure 15 reveals the careful visual composition that shaped PKU’s global identity. From my viewpoint analysis, I noted that the image was taken at eye level, which fostered a sense of equality among the participants and conveyed a collaborative message. The

wide-angle perspective ensured that every individual in the group was visible, emphasizing the collective effort rather than individual prominence. This viewpoint aligned with the image's diplomatic narrative, symbolizing mutual respect between China and the United States. By centralizing the group within the frame, the image visually underscored the balance and harmony sought through this event, a theme that echoed the historical essence of Ping Pong Diplomacy.



**Figure 15: Screenshot of the tweet on PKU's X account (2023, December 18)**

The foreground and background worked together to reinforce the narrative. The red banner in the foreground immediately captured my attention, with its bilingual text explicitly stating the purpose of the event. This textual element bridged cultural and linguistic divides, making the image accessible to both Chinese and global audiences. Behind the banner, the

participants—comprising athletes, diplomats, and other representatives—were carefully arranged to convey unity. The background further contextualized the event with a bilingual backdrop and the flags of China and the United States, emphasizing the bilateral nature of the event. The use of national symbols, paired with the celebratory messaging, represented an intentional alignment of PKU with broader narratives of global alliances.

The mood and tone of the image projected an atmosphere of optimism and collaboration. The smiling participants, vibrant colors, and the intergenerational presence of both athletes and officials created a sense of pride and professionalism. The image invoked nostalgia for the historical significance of “Ping-pong Diplomacy” while projecting hope for continued collaboration. I saw this dual focus on past and future as creating a powerful emotional resonance, positioning the event as both a reflection of historical achievements and a step toward fostering future diplomatic relationships. Based on this analysis, I viewed the image as a deliberate effort to position PKU as a global leader in international partnerships. The representation of the table tennis team connected the university to the historical legacy of “Ping-pong Diplomacy”, a symbolic event in U.S.-China relations. By including diplomats and officials, the image portrayed PKU as an institution actively engaged in global conversations beyond academia. The visual balance, bilingual text, and historical references aligned with PKU’s aspirations to present itself as a world-class university with influence beyond its national borders.

The representation of PKU’s participation in “Ping-pong Diplomacy” carried broader implications for global higher education. To me, PKU’s participation in such events suggested that universities were not just sites of knowledge production but also platforms for projecting national identities and geopolitical aspirations. By showcasing its involvement in international

diplomacy, PKU contributed to reshaping the narrative of what it meant to be a world-class university. To me, this approach could not only enhance PKU's reputation but also highlight the growing role of Chinese universities in shaping global higher education discourses. PKU's commemoration served to elevate its international prestige and demonstrate its active role in global engagement. By involving both its leaders and students in these commemorative events, PKU positioned itself as both an academic institution and an influential participant in the diplomatic arena. The emphasis on young athletes and students further indicated PKU's commitment to engaging the next generation in the ongoing legacy of "Ping-pong Diplomacy." Through this narrative, I interpreted that PKU promoted continuity and optimism in Sino-U.S. relations, encouraging its students to see themselves as active participants in bridging political divides and fostering global connections. I suggested this as PKU's unique way of reinforcing a forward-looking approach to international relations and partnerships.

Nevertheless, to me, this representation raised important questions about the power dynamics at play in how Chinese universities like PKU presented themselves on the global stage. While Figure 15 outwardly conveyed a sense of harmony and mutual respect, I recognized that such portrayals could sometimes obscure deeper inequalities or imbalances within the global higher education system (Montgomery, 2016). For example, global academia remained largely dominated by Western institutions in terms of rankings, resources, and influence, which meant that universities like PKU had to work harder to gain recognition on an international scale. In this context, I interpreted PKU's use of historical narratives like "Ping-pong Diplomacy" as an effort to align with global values such as cooperation, cultural exchange, and diplomacy. By framing itself as a mediator of these global values, PKU projected an image of collaboration.

However, I also noticed those framing as not purely neutral or apolitical—I analyzed it as

part of a deliberate strategy to enhance both the university's international standing and China's geopolitical influence. As Hodzi and Amoah (2023) noted, leading universities across the globe usually only collaborated with equally prestigious universities, and most existing programs reinforced representations of non-Western universities as inferior. With that said, while the image appeared to promote ideals of equality and partnership, it was also deeply embedded in larger, more complex power dynamics. These included the tension between national goals and global academic standards, as well as the struggle of Chinese universities to carve out a space for themselves in a system that had historically privileged Western institutions. Recognizing these dynamics helped me understand that representations like this were not just about celebrating global alliances—they were also about navigating and reshaping the structures of power in global higher education.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I examined how top Chinese universities strategically construct and reinforce the meaning of global partnerships and collaborations on X/Twitter. Through signifying practices such as leadership meetings, student participation in international exchanges, and symbolic representations like “Ping-pong Diplomacy,” I argue that these universities position themselves as key actors in global higher education. My analysis demonstrated that while these representations emphasize institutional prestige, mutual exchange, and academic collaboration, they also reveal underlying power asymmetries within global higher education. The privileging of elite Western partnerships and the reliance on Western-centric frameworks of excellence suggest that Chinese universities remain entangled in an international system historically dominated by Western institutions. At the same time, China's engagement with the Global South indicates an alternative mode of global academic integration, one that seeks to

reshape the geopolitics of higher education. In this chapter, I demonstrated how these institutions mobilize global partnerships to advance their legitimacy on the international stage, and my analysis contributes to a critical understanding of how social media platforms mediate academic hierarchies, institutional branding, and the negotiation of global recognition in global higher education.

In the next chapter, I will move beyond analysis to discuss the implications of my research. In the conclusion, I will synthesize the key findings across all chapters, reflect on their contributions to scholarship on higher education, and explore the theoretical and practical implications of how Chinese universities construct their global identities through social media.

## **CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION AND LOOKING AHEAD**

In this concluding chapter, I first summarize the key findings of each data chapters (Chapter 4-7), highlighting how each chapter and all three chapters collectively answer my research question – How do top Chinese universities represent themselves on X/Twitter as world-class universities? Next, I discuss the study’s contributions to the field of higher education research and then explore the broader implications for practice. Following this, I propose future research directions, such as the possibilities for multilingual and cross-platform analyses, comparative studies across different geopolitical contexts, and audience engagement research. Finally, I offer my final thoughts, reflecting that while the digital and political landscapes continue to change, the fundamental questions about power, representation, and institutional identity remain relevant and require continued scholarly attention.

### **Overview of Findings**

In this dissertation, I demonstrated how top Chinese universities utilized X/Twitter to construct their representation in the global higher education landscape, particularly through the social media space. Across three thematic areas—research excellence (Chapter 4), student engagement in China’s cultural diplomacy (Chapter 5), and the institutions’ global alliances (Chapter 6)—the universities constructed representations that served both domestic priorities and international ambitions. In doing so, they not only reflected prevailing values and hierarchies but also attempted to fix the meaning of what it meant to be a world-class university—one that aligned with China’s cultural, political, and developmental agendas while appealing to global audiences. Together, my dissertation revealed how top Chinese universities used social media to reinforce the idea of a world-class university: one that was scientifically outstanding, culturally rich, globally appealing, and internationally networked with influential partners. Through

multimodal discourses on social media, top Chinese universities not only enhanced their institutional prestige but also contributed to shaping global narratives about China's role in global higher education and its positioning as a rising global power.

In Chapter 4, I revealed that the representation of research excellence by top Chinese universities on X/Twitter was overwhelmingly framed through a STEM-centric lens, reinforcing dominant national and global narratives around innovation, competitiveness, and societal impact. My analysis showed that top Chinese universities employed signifying practices—through textual descriptors, hashtags, emojis, standardized visual templates, and depictions of high-tech laboratories—to construct and fix the meaning of research excellence. The representation was closely aligned with China's political, economic, and developmental goals, as well as global standards of academic prestige driven largely by citation impact, publication metrics, global rankings, and alignment with policy agendas.

Within these representations, STEM fields were persistently privileged. Breakthroughs, pioneering researchers, and world-leading facilities were showcased in ways that appealed to international audiences, highlighting China's advancements and contributions to global challenges. The discourse emphasized the role of universities in producing cutting-edge knowledge that addressed urgent issues like climate change, public health, and energy sustainability. By linking their research outputs to international benchmarks (e.g., publishing in *Nature* and *Science*) and countrywide priorities (e.g., participating in policy-making forums such as the “Two Sessions”), these universities projected a narrative of being indispensable players in national development and global knowledge production.

In contrast, HSS fields were significantly underrepresented and visually marginalized. My analysis showed that HSS achievements were rarely spotlighted and, when featured, depicted



almost exclusively through traditional academic symbols, such as books. This lack of visual dynamism and limited recognition contrasted sharply with the rich imagery and forward-looking portrayals of STEM fields. The imbalance contributed to a hierarchy of academic value, implying that technological and scientific advancements are more critical, globally relevant, and prestigious than the intellectual contributions of HSS. Beyond disciplinary hierarchies, my analysis uncovered underlying gender and cultural politics. Visuals often featured male researchers in technologically advanced lab settings, thereby reinforcing gender stereotypes and excluding women and other underrepresented groups from the imagined spaces of scientific discovery. The reliance on conventional icons such as books to represent HSS, as well as an overall privileging of Eurocentric scholarly traditions, further narrowed the scope of what was recognized as legitimate and valuable research.

In representing the theme of research excellence, each university adopts distinct strategies that reflect both institutional priorities and national agendas. ZJU emphasizes alignment with global sustainability goals to showcase STEM research tied to climate change, health, and social good. SJTU, by contrast, employs a standardized visual template for its research posts, signaling institutional consistency and academic rigor, while primarily focusing on STEM achievements. THU distinguishes itself by integrating research excellence with national policy influence and frames the university as a think tank that informs governance. PKU, however, offers the most visible representation of HSS among the four, often featuring scholars' quotes and images of personal libraries, but still relies heavily on traditional symbols like books. These differentiated approaches reflect varying institutional identities, but all contribute to elevating the universities' research reputation and collectively project China's growing authority in global knowledge production.

In Chapter 5, I explored how top Chinese universities represented student engagement on their X/Twitter accounts and examined how these representations served China's cultural diplomacy and soft power objectives. My findings revealed that universities strategically used social media to position themselves as both global academic leaders and custodians of Chinese cultural heritage. By showcasing international students—from diverse backgrounds—actively participating in traditional festivals, cultural celebrations, campus activities, and initiatives like the BRI, these institutions crafted narratives that blended academic excellence, cultural identity, and national pride.

A central theme that emerged from the analysis was the alignment of student engagement with China's cultural diplomacy goals. Through the promotion of Han Chinese festivals, solar terms, ancient campus artifacts and traditional cultural performances, these universities offered a curated vision of Chinese culture that is both historically rich and vibrantly alive. Students were depicted as enthusiastic cultural ambassadors, bridging local traditions and global audiences. Their active participation in events like the Chinese New Year or the introduction of Chinese cultural practices, such as calligraphy, highlighted the universities' desire to foster cross-cultural understanding. These representations situated Chinese higher education as a nurturing ground for global citizens who appreciated and carried forward Chinese cultural values. In addition, by featuring international students engaging with cutting-edge technologies—high-speed trains, electric vehicles—and integrating them into BRI-related activities, the universities fixed meaning around China's image as a forward-looking, innovative power. The portrayal of students in these contexts implied that Chinese higher education shaped global youth who were confident in China's future and its contributions to global development.

Visually, the universities employed strategic signifiers—hashtags, emojis, traditional

symbols, campus artifacts, and images of international students interacting with Chinese culture and technology—to reinforce desired narratives. These signifying practices constructed an appealing image of China as a harmonious blend of tradition and modernity. The framing of international students as active participants in cultural activities and national initiatives suggested that China’s ascent as a leading educational and cultural force was not simply top-down but also embraced and affirmed by a global community of learners.

In Chapter 5, the four top Chinese universities represent the theme of student engagement in cultural diplomacy through distinct yet complementary strategies. SJTU emphasizes traditional cultural heritage by showcasing Chinese festivals and solar terms. PKU highlights international students’ active participation in cultural practices, as well as its historical artifacts, to present itself as a custodian of China’s cultural legacy. ZJU aligns student engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative, using visual and textual discourse to reinforce China’s global development vision. THU, focuses on technological innovation, depicting international students engaging with infrastructure and advanced technologies to project China’s modernity. These differing representations collectively advance China’s soft power, while allowing each university to construct its unique institutional identity within the broader narrative of cultural diplomacy.

In Chapter 6, I examined how top Chinese universities used X/Twitter to construct a narrative of global alliances—international collaborations, partnerships, and exchanges—that amplified their standing in global higher education. Across the cases, universities represented themselves as integral players in shaping transnational academic networks and advancing collective knowledge, with international alliances framed as strategic imperatives and value-driven efforts that improved cultural understanding, technological advancement, and global progress.

A key finding in this chapter was that these representations emphasized institutional leadership and prestige. Through images and texts featuring high-level delegations, formal signing ceremonies, and joint initiatives with renowned Western institutions, universities presented themselves as proactive architects of global partnerships. The universities positioned themselves as co-leaders rather than followers—aligning their institutional visions with widely recognized norms of academic excellence and international engagement. Visual cues, such as group photos with senior officials and symbolic gestures, reinforced narratives of equality, collegiality, and shared purpose, even as broader power imbalances and geopolitical tensions lurked beneath the surface. In addition to leadership-level alliances, top Chinese universities also foregrounded students as cultural and academic ambassadors who actively participated in international forums, company visits, and cross-cultural exchange programs. By doing so, the universities projected an image of nurturing globally minded graduates—future innovators and bridge-builders who could navigate intercultural contexts and align China’s educational goals with global sustainability and industry trends.

In Chapter 6, the four top Chinese universities represent the theme of global partnerships differently to project distinct institutional identities within the global higher education landscape. ZJU and SJTU emphasize leadership-driven collaborations, showcasing high-level meetings with elite Western institutions to highlight institutional prestige and long-term alliances. In contrast, THU adopts a student-centric approach by spotlighting students as global ambassadors engaging in international exchanges, industry visits, and cross-cultural initiatives to cultivate global citizenship. PKU uniquely frames its global partnerships through historical narratives like “Ping-pong Diplomacy,” positioning itself as a diplomatic actor that bridges geopolitical divides through cultural and sports diplomacy. Together, these diverse representations reflect how each

university navigates global academic hierarchies, with varying emphases on leadership, student mobility, or symbolic diplomacy to construct legitimacy and assert global relevance.

In Chapter 6, I argued that these social media representations addressed institutional reputations, appealed to international partners, and aligned with China's soft power strategies. By merging imagery of global institutional alliances, student diplomacy, and historical cultural legacies, top Chinese universities shaped an aspirational identity of world-class leadership. They asserted their capacity to influence global higher education agendas, respond to contemporary challenges, and craft a narrative of China as a constructive, forward-looking collaborator on the international stage.

Across the three themes, a coherent representational strategy emerges—one that constructs a composite identity of the Chinese world-class university as technologically advanced, culturally grounded, and globally integrated. These thematic strands are not isolated; instead, they reinforce each other. For instance, the emphasis on research excellence (especially in STEM) legitimizes China's claim to global academic leadership, while student engagement in cultural diplomacy softens China's image and fosters emotional identification with Chinese traditions. Simultaneously, global partnerships provide the infrastructure through which both scientific and cultural capital are circulated and legitimized internationally. Together, these themes create a layered institutional persona: one that can speak to global aspirations and local legitimacy at the same time.

Taken together, the three themes in this study reveal a holistic strategy of world-class university branding in which scientific legitimacy, cultural soft power, and international legitimacy are mutually reinforcing. Research excellence provides the foundation for credibility in global academia; student engagement in cultural diplomacy humanizes and localizes that

excellence by attaching it to Chinese traditions and national pride; and global partnerships act as bridges that circulate and validate both scientific and cultural capital on the world stage. These themes interact to construct an image of Chinese universities as simultaneously innovative, rooted, and globally networked.

However, beneath this unified image lies a set of tensions that reveal the complex and sometimes paradoxical nature of these representations. On one hand, the universities project global superiority by showcasing scientific breakthroughs, elite international partnerships, and international student bodies. On the other hand, they embed strong nationalistic elements, including traditional cultural imagery, patriotic values, and strategic alignment with China's geopolitical goals. This duality results in a layered identity that is both outward-facing and inward-affirming, combining global competitiveness with cultural humility. These tensions are not contradictions but deliberate signifying practices, enabling the universities to engage international audiences while navigating the nation's ideological demands. Ultimately, in this dissertation, I demonstrate how Chinese universities construct flexible institutional identities that both reflect and reshape the global norms of world-classness through distinctly Chinese visions of academic prestige and national purpose.

### **Contributions to the Field of Higher Education**

My dissertation makes some contributions to higher education scholarship. It pushes theoretical debates on global excellence, cultural diplomacy, and disciplinary hierarchies into new territory, introduces a refined methodological framework for multimodal analysis, and adds valuable empirical evidence from a critical but understudied context. By engaging in a multimodal, discourse-focused analysis of institutions' X/Twitter content, my study creatively extends and refines theoretical and methodological frameworks commonly used to understand

university branding, global positioning, and the negotiation of academic values. This dissertation offers a more expansive and nuanced vision of how top universities in China construct their global identities and roles through a global social media platform and calls the field to consider how power, representation, and meaning-making occur in the mediated spaces where higher education now thrives.

First, my dissertation deepens scholarly conversations about world-class universities by illustrating how top Chinese institutions navigate externally imposed standards of excellence, while actively shaping what it means to be world-class with local characteristics. The definition of “world-class university” is contested and still under debates by scholars and practitioners. Commonly, such institutions are recognized by their outstanding performance in global university rankings. Altbach and Salmi (2011) suggested that world-class universities typically feature a concentration of talented individuals, substantial resources devoted to learning and research, and governance structures conducive to administrative and leadership excellence. Unlike much of the literature, which often accepts ranking metrics and STEM-driven benchmarks as fixed (Ahlers et al., 2023; Marginson, 2014), my study positions global excellence as a negotiated, performative construct. On X/Twitter, these universities strategically adopt, adapt, and visualize global norms to align with national priorities and international expectations., yet my work extends this by showing how social media becomes a site for meaning-making, where universities blend global and local discourses to assert their identities. Although rankings in China are embedded in state-driven policies to foster competitiveness (Ahlers et al., 2023), in addition to those measurable outcomes, top Chinese universities also define “world-class” by highlighting their ability to engage in cultural diplomacy and their role in advancing the nation’s soft power goals.

My research also sharpens the lens on higher education's role in cultural diplomacy and soft power. By analyzing how institutions frame student engagement, cultural heritage, and global partnerships in social media narratives, it reveals universities as agents of cultural translation and geopolitical influence. My study builds on Liu (2019), who examines China's cultural diplomacy through Confucius Institutes to emphasize localized engagement. My study pushes this further by highlighting how X/Twitter enables universities to project cultural identities to global audiences, positioning them as unofficial diplomats in a digital age. This perspective underscores how globalization transforms higher education into a stage for shaping international relations.

Moreover, my dissertation invites critical reflection on how social media reinforces or challenges inequalities, particularly disciplinary hierarchies. My findings expose the disproportionate emphasis on STEM fields and the marginalization of HSS, contributing to debates about the values embedded in global higher education. My findings resonate with Qian et al. (2025), who noted the dominance of engineering and natural sciences in Chinese universities, with weaker humanities intersections. My work extends this critique by showing how digital representations on X/Twitter amplify these hierarchies, perpetuating gender imbalances and Eurocentric scholarly traditions. It calls for a reexamination of how mediated spaces shape academic priorities and cultural logics.

Methodologically, my dissertation refines research that study higher education's digital representation through a multimodal discourse approach, integrating texts, images, emojis, hashtags, and other digital signifiers as interconnected elements of meaning-making. This approach goes beyond traditional textual analysis, offering a deeper understanding of the power dynamics embedded in social media communication. Building on earlier studies, such as Bae et



al. (2023), who used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine Chinese and Korean university websites, and Estera and Shahjahan (2019) and Shahjahan et al. (2022), who applied representation and visual analysis to unpack the visual gaze in global university ranking sites, my framework integrates the strengths of these approaches. It investigates how top Chinese universities' social media posts construct ideological stances, reinforce institutional authority, and mediate global-local tensions. The strength of this multimodal method lies in its ability to uncover the subtle ways in which ideology and power are communicated, providing a comprehensive lens for understanding how universities project values and engage diverse audiences.

Empirically, my dissertation addresses a critical gap by focusing on Chinese universities' presence on X/Twitter—a context underexplored compared to Western institutions or China's domestic social media platforms. While there is growing scholarship on how Chinese universities use domestic social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Bilibili for institutional branding, student engagement, and political education, these efforts primarily target a domestic audience and are often shaped by state-directed communication norms and platform constraints. For instance, studies have shown that Chinese universities use domestic platforms to disseminate campus news, manage crises, promote ideological messaging, and foster internal community-building (Qiao et al., 2015; Cao & Yan, 2020; Yang & Li, 2024). In contrast, my dissertation shifts the analytical lens to Chinese universities' use of X/Twitter—a global, English-language platform that is inaccessible for most domestic audiences. Unlike domestic platforms that emphasize compliance and local engagement, the strategies observed on X/Twitter reflect an outward-facing image crafted to align with global academic norms and soft power ambitions. While domestic platforms reinforce national values and internal engagement, global

platforms are mobilized to assert China's academic legitimacy, attract international collaborators and students, and position Chinese universities as global leaders.

By analyzing the visual and textual strategies employed on X/Twitter, my study offers a context-specific account of how Chinese universities attempt to reshape their global visibility and participate in transnational higher education discourse. These insights challenge assumptions about the unidirectionality of global knowledge flows and invite comparative analysis between Western and non-Western institutions. As China's presence in global higher education continues to expand, understanding how its top universities represent themselves in international digital spaces is crucial for grasping broader shifts in academic hierarchies, cultural representation, and geopolitical influence.

### **Implications of the Study**

The findings of my dissertation revealed significant insights into how top Chinese universities strategically use social media to craft and project their identity as world-class institutions. These implications not only contribute to understanding the dynamics of global higher education but also offer practical considerations for higher education institutions, policy-making, and cultural diplomacy.

My analysis demonstrated that social media has become a critical space for universities to engage in global competition for prestige, resources, and influence. In my findings, top Chinese universities are strategically representing their strengths in research excellence, student engagement, and international collaboration. My study suggests that the global higher education landscape is increasingly diverse, with Chinese institutions asserting themselves as important players. Universities worldwide, both in the global north and south, can draw lessons from these practices, particularly in how social media can be utilized to enhance visibility and influence in a

rapidly globalizing academic market.

For universities in the global north, particularly in Western countries, my study highlights the growing significance of social media as a tool for global engagement and branding. While institutions in the global north have long been entrenched in global university rankings, there is still potential for them to deepen their online presence, especially by diversifying the representation. Universities in the global north should be cautious of the risks identified in the findings. In the dissertation, I argued the potential dangers of narrowing the definition of “excellence”. As global universities continue to shape the academic discourse, there is a growing need for a critical reflection on how social media narratives are constructed, especially as they might reinforce narrow, Western-centric definitions of world-class status. For global higher education to foster a more inclusive and diverse academic environment, universities must ensure that the voices and intellectual traditions from all disciplines, populations and cultures are integrated and equally valued. By embracing digital diplomacy, Western institutions can continue to build global partnerships, frame their contributions to pressing global issues, and reposition themselves as leaders in addressing shared global challenges.

For universities in the global south, the implications are equally profound. The findings offer a roadmap for how institutions in the global south can draw on social media and digital diplomacy to build global prestige and assert their role in global academic networks. While Chinese universities utilize X/Twitter to advance national soft power strategies through representations of cultural diplomacy and student engagement, universities in the global south can similarly position their students and faculty as active contributors to global debates on sustainability, social justice, and technological innovation. My dissertation illustrates how Chinese universities have constructed student engagement as an extension of China’s soft power

goals, offering an effective strategy for universities in the global south to frame their own cultural and academic contributions as vital to global progress.

My study also offers implications for Chinese universities. The representation of culture by Chinese universities illustrates a deliberate alignment with China's soft power goals. These universities not only promote academic achievements but also position themselves as cultural ambassadors, projecting an image of China that blends tradition and modernity. This has significant implications for China's global influence, as these representations contribute to reshaping international perceptions of China and its role in global development. However, while these social media representations aim to present a harmonious image, the underlying power dynamics, such as the privileging of Han Chinese cultural elements, can limit the inclusivity of these portrayals. Policymakers and university administrators may consider how to balance national interests with the need for a more diverse and inclusive cross-cultural dialogue and engagement, particularly for institutions aiming to build world-class status in more diverse contexts.

My study also has implications for understanding global partnerships, particularly through initiatives like the BRI. My dissertation suggests that top Chinese universities are actively participating in global partnerships to align their narratives with national soft power strategies, which in turn shape global perceptions of China. According to the findings, I argue that there is a need for higher education policies in both the global north and south to consider the role of digital platforms in internationalization strategies. Universities are not only engaging in global partnerships but also showcasing these collaborations as a way to legitimize their world-class status and academic leadership.

Finally, the findings have practical implications by encouraging universities to rethink

their roles in shaping the discourse on international collaboration and to incorporate digital diplomacy into their strategies to navigate and influence the dynamics of global higher education. By positioning Chinese universities as important players in reconfiguring these narratives, I suggest the importance of aligning social media strategies with global initiatives. I also suggest that institutions in both the global north and south can strategically use impactful social media platforms to mediate global partnerships, enhancing their branding and strengthening their strategic positioning in the global higher education landscape.

### **Directions for Future Research**

My dissertation has explored how top Chinese universities use X/Twitter to represent themselves to global audience and to construct their identity as world-class universities. Through a multimodal analysis, my research uncovered the underlying power dynamics, ideological stances, and the institutions' alignment with China's soft power strategies. The findings offered new insights into how higher education institutions use social media to shape their international presence, while also shedding light on the construction and perpetuation of the concept of "world-class university" and the strategic role of Chinese universities in advancing the nation's global influence. Based on my current research, I discussed some remain unexplored areas and emerging trends that provide rich opportunities for future research in this section.

First, I recommend future research to consider a multilingual and multiplatform analysis. Chinese universities operate in diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. While a few top Chinese universities post content on global social media platforms like X/Twitter, predominantly in English, the majority remain highly active on domestic platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) by posting in Chinese. Each platform serves distinct audiences and offers unique affordances that influence how content is created and disseminated.

This line of inquiry could reveal how Chinese universities tailor their messaging to align with the expectations of international stakeholders versus domestic audiences. Investigating the nuance in posts in different languages could uncover how universities adapt their tone, content, and rhetorical strategies to construct distinct identities for international and domestic audiences. Moreover, examining representation strategies across platforms could shed light on how universities navigate platform-specific norms and functionalities. For instance, how might the short-video format of Douyin influence the representation of student life or academic excellence compared to X/Twitter or Weibo? A cross-platform and multilingual perspective is significant because it would capture the complexities of audience segmentation and global outreach in higher education. Understanding these dynamics could inform broader discussions about the role of digital diplomacy in shaping institutional reputation, the interplay between local and global narratives, and the strategies universities employ to assert their competitiveness on the world stage.

Second, I recommend that future research explore comparative studies of social media representation across higher education institutions in different regions. Comparative analyses could uncover how universities in diverse geopolitical, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts construct their online narratives and engage diverse audiences. This approach would help reveal how broader geopolitical factors, such as national priorities, cultural values, and global hierarchies, shape universities' identities on social media. For example, my study highlights how Chinese universities represent events related to international collaborations, often framing them within the broader context of China's soft power initiatives and its aspirations to position itself as a global leader in higher education. Future research could investigate how the partner universities from other regions represent the same events. Such research could uncover discrepancies or

synergies in the portrayal of partnerships, providing insights into the power dynamics and mutual perceptions inherent in these collaborations. By examining how institutions from different geopolitical regions represent the same events or partnerships, such research could reveal implicit power hierarchies and ideological stances that influence how collaborations are perceived globally. In addition, examining how social media can serve as an entry point into understanding soft power and digital diplomacy dynamics in various regions could shed light on how the global, national, and local intersect and collide, offering deeper insights into the multifaceted nature of international collaborations and the digital platforms that mediate them.

Third, while the current study offers a snapshot of Chinese universities' social media representations, future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to explore how these representations evolve over time in response to political shifts, global crises, or technological advancements. A longitudinal perspective would allow researchers to trace changes in social media representation and examine the underlying drivers of these shifts. For instance, the election of Donald Trump in 2024, marking his return to the presidency, has significant implications for U.S.-China relations. This political shift may influence how Chinese universities frame their international collaborations and national identity in their digital outreach, potentially adjusting their narratives to align with the evolving geopolitical landscape. Understanding how these institutions respond to political priorities, global challenges, and technological development can provide valuable insights into the broader dynamics of higher education in an increasingly volatile and interconnected world.

While this dissertation analyzes the content produced by universities, future research could focus on how audiences engage with and interpret these narratives. By examining audience responses, future research could explore how students, faculty, and other stakeholders perceive

and are influenced by the social media representations. Methods such as sentiment analysis, surveys, interviews, and focus groups could uncover patterns in audience reactions, including the emotions, attitudes, and behaviors evoked by university social media content. The significance of this potential research lies in its ability to bridge the gap between content creation and audience reception, providing a more holistic understanding of the effectiveness of universities' social media branding strategies. It would offer valuable insights into how well universities achieve their communication objectives, whether they successfully resonate with their intended audiences, and how their digital narratives influence perceptions of institutional prestige, credibility, and relevance. Understanding audience engagement could have practical implications for higher education institutions. By identifying which aspects of their social media strategies are most impactful, universities could refine their content to better align with audience expectations and cultural sensitivities.

Future research could also benefit from exploring alternative theories to deepen our understanding of how universities are portrayed on social media. While my dissertation primarily utilizes CDA and the representation theory, other theoretical frameworks—such as affect theory, postcolonial theory, or feminist theory—could offer fresh insights into the emotional and temporal dimensions of university branding. These theories could uncover how emotions, historical contexts, and temporal shifts in global higher education narratives shape the construction of university identities.

Finally, future research could examine alternative media to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how higher education institutions are perceived and discussed. As social media platforms are usually centralized and dominated by institutional messaging, alternative platforms may emerge as critical counterpoints which offer diverse and often unfiltered perspectives on



university life, policies, and global engagement. Future research could investigate how alternative media, such as student-run blogs, independent social media accounts, community forums contribute to the discourse surrounding higher education institutions. These sources often provide unique insights into the lived experiences of students, faculty, and local communities, shedding light on aspects that institutional narratives may overlook or underplay. Such research could explore the role of alternative media in amplifying voices that challenge dominant narratives, contributing to broader debates about accountability, transparency, and inclusivity in higher education. Furthermore, As AI technologies continue to evolve, their influence on social media content creation and dissemination is becoming increasingly significant. Future research could explore the role of AI in shaping how universities construct and present their identities online.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the research is carefully structured and conducted, it is essential for me to acknowledge and address certain limitations inherent to this study. These limitations may impact the generalizability and depth of the findings.

First, in line with the constructivist paradigm, I recognize that my (the researcher's) interpretation plays a vital role in shaping the analysis, contributing to the co-construction of meaning. From a constructivist standpoint, subjectivity is not perceived as a limitation but rather as an integral aspect of understanding and interpreting subjective experiences. However, it is crucial to highlight that, even within a constructivist framework, my subjectivity could introduce potential biases or shape the identification and interpretation of themes.

Second, my study has a limited scope. I only examine four top Chinese universities' social media representation on X/Twitter. However, these universities' representation on other

social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Sina Weibo are not carefully examined. While these universities are prestigious and globally top-ranked, the findings may not be representative of all Chinese universities, particularly those outside the C9 League. This limited scope restricts the generalizability of the results to the broader landscape of Chinese higher education.

In addition, my current study has its temporal constraints. The data analysis focuses on a specific period of time. However, it is important to acknowledge that the limited temporal scope may not fully capture the universities' representations during other times of the year or in response to different external factors, which could affect the richness of the analysis.

Finally, I acknowledge that meaning-making is inherently contingent on viewers' linguistic and cultural positions. While my dual positionality as both Chinese and an international student enriches the depth and contextual sensitivity of this study, it also introduces certain limitations. My bilingual abilities, while enabling me to interpret both Chinese and English content, may not fully account for how international audiences with varied linguistic capacities perceive and engage with these representations. For instance, some global users on X/Twitter may be fluent in Chinese and able to grasp the cultural references or untranslated elements embedded in the posts, while others may rely solely on English content or visual cues. My analytical lens may unintentionally privilege readings aligned with my own bilingual and bicultural background, potentially overlooking how monolingual or culturally distant audiences decode the same content.

## **Final Thoughts**

Completing this dissertation is not an easy journey. When I wrote this final section of the dissertation, Donald Trump was elected as the next president of the United States. As X/Twitter

was purchased by Elon Musk and he used it to support Trump's election campaign, more and more users are leaving X/Twitter to other social media platforms. In addition, given the tension between China and the U.S., the two-decade academic collaboration between the University of Michigan and Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China has also been announced to be terminated. However, I analyzed the visit of leadership team from the University of Michigan to SJTU in this dissertation. I believe there are probably more changes that have already taken place. Therefore, some may question, is my research still valuable? I have similar concerns during the writing process.

Nevertheless, I believe that the validity of this research remains intact, as it captures a critical moment in the evolving relationship between higher education, social media and geopolitical tensions. Although platforms like X/Twitter are experiencing shifts in user engagement, and Sino-U.S. academic collaborations are being redefined, the underlying power dynamics, ideological constructions, and representations examined in this dissertation offer insights that transcend immediate political events. Social media platforms may rise and fall in popularity, and political climates may swing dramatically. But deeper questions at the heart of how these platform shape transnational conversations and power dynamics around global higher education remain pressing. As my analysis on representation is not merely about studying the present as a fixed reality but understanding how institutions, social media, and the geopolitics of knowledge are continuously constructed, negotiated, and reshaped over time.

My hope is that this work contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of global higher education narratives shaped by social media, one that acknowledges the complexities of power, representation, and cultural exchange in an increasingly interconnected world. As the digital sphere continues to evolve, so too will the strategies of representation employed by

universities. It is my aspiration that future research will build on this study and uncover new insights into how institutions navigate these dynamics and contribute to shaping a more inclusive and diverse global higher education landscape.

The journey to this point has been a challenging yet rewarding one. It has not only deepened my understanding of the research questions but has also affirmed my commitment to critical inquiry and the pursuit of knowledge that bridges disciplines and cultures. As I conclude this dissertation, I carry forward the lessons learned and the questions yet unanswered.

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