

A photograph of three graduates from behind, wearing black mortarboard caps with purple tassels and purple stoles over black gowns. They are standing in a line, looking towards a blurred background of other people and buildings.

# Turbulent Times in Inter/Nationalising Higher Education

**Susan L. Robertson**

University of Manchester, Wolfson College Cambridge

Keynote: EDULOG 2025 International Conference

Porto, 22-23<sup>rd</sup> May 2025

Historicising (higher  
education/learning)  
movements...

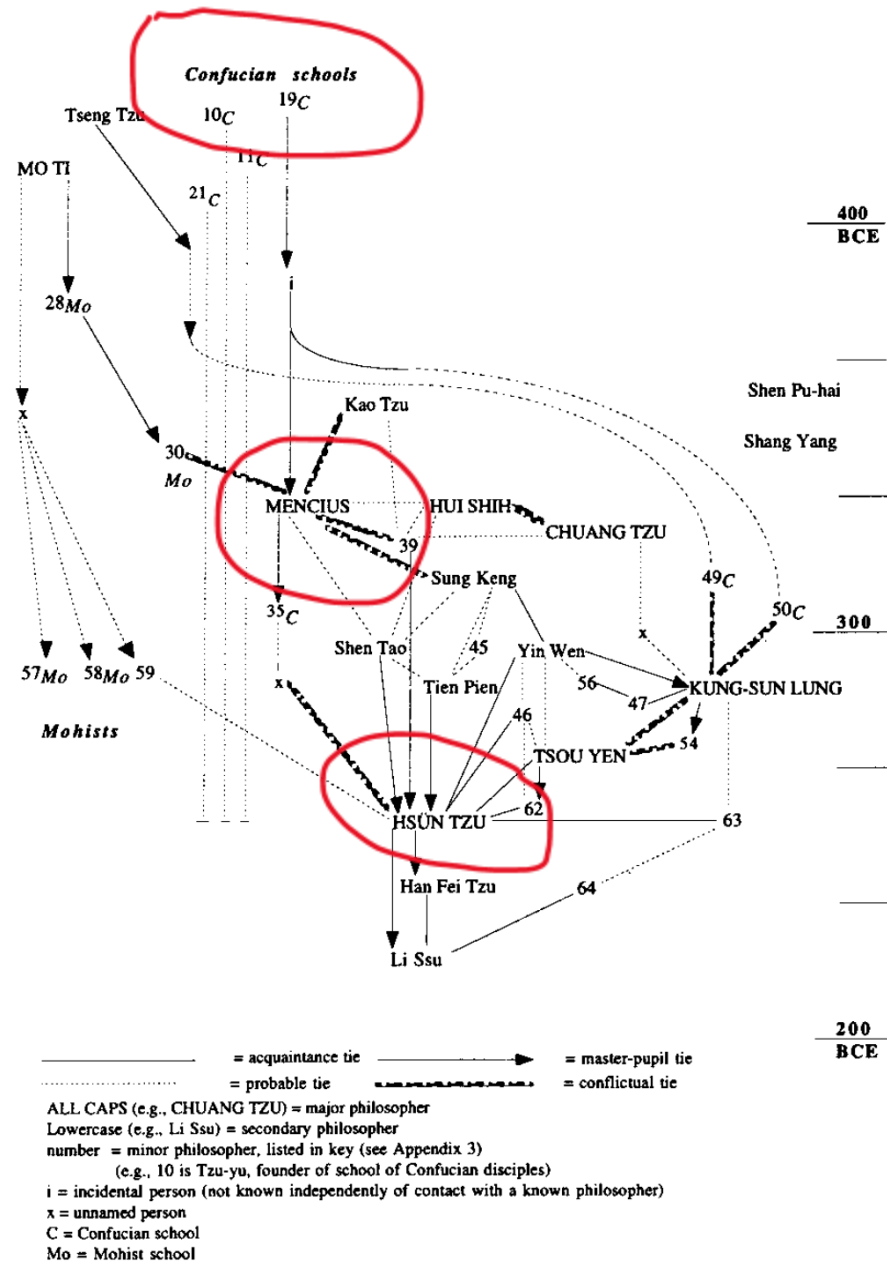


FIGURE 2.1. NETWORK OF CHINESE PHILOSOPHERS, 400–200 B.C.E.

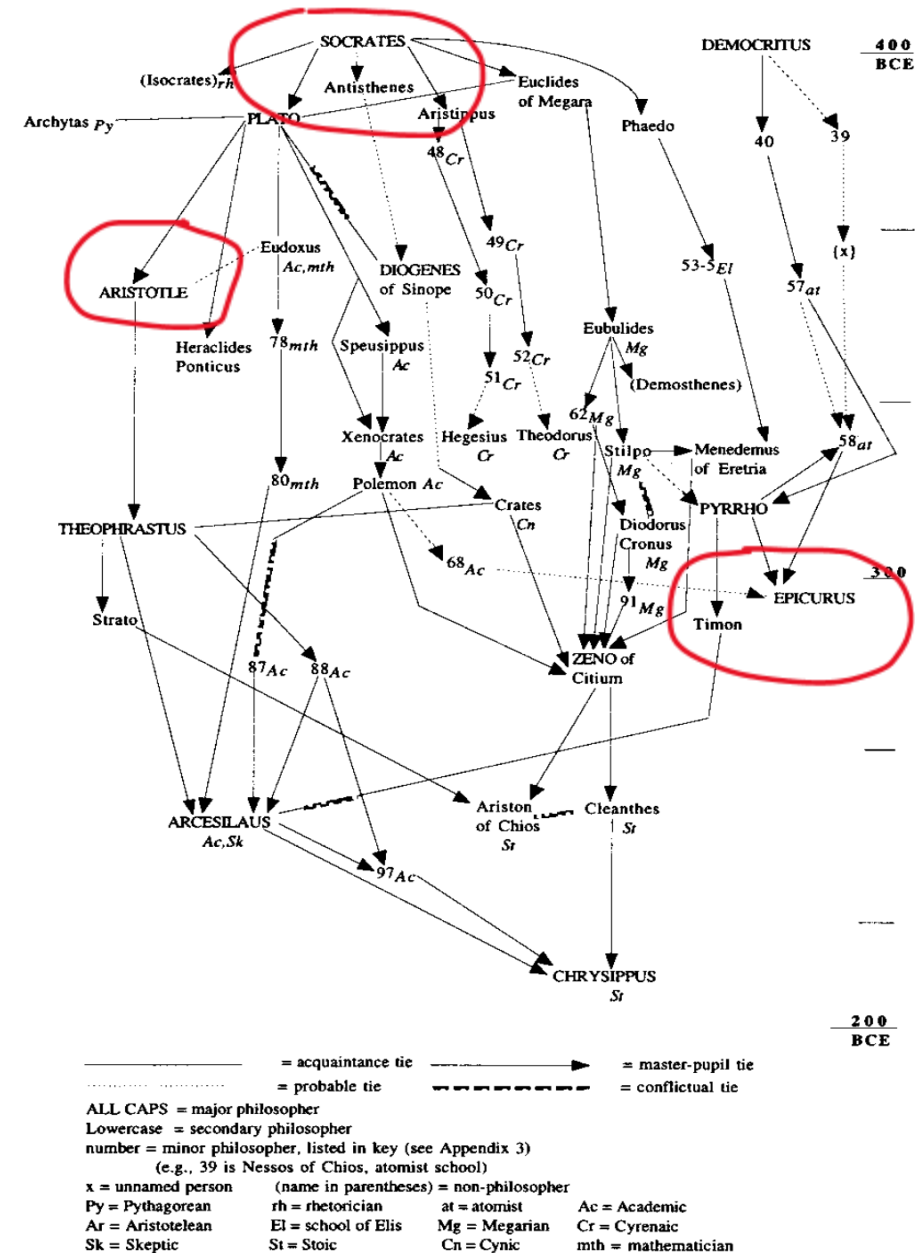
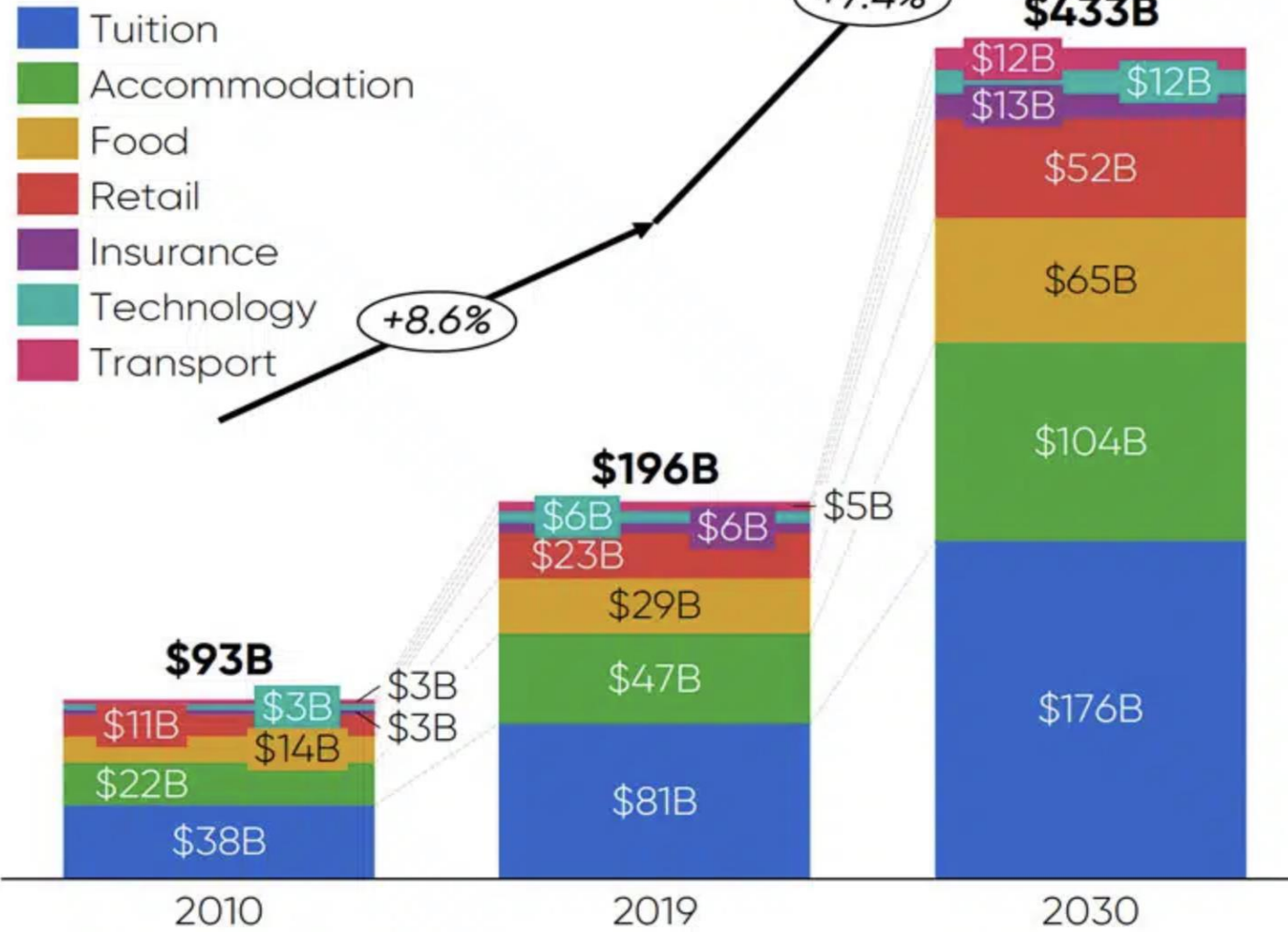


FIGURE 2.2. NETWORK OF GREEK PHILOSOPHERS FROM SOCRATES TO CHRYSIPPUS

# Transnational higher education...

...given shape and direction by combinations of supranational and sub/national state-led knowledge economy and foreign affairs policies, city and university strategies to attract students and extend institutional fabrics out into global space, and decisions made by individuals and families regarding credentials, social mobility, or in some cases side-stepping regime politics (states of exception).

## International Education - Total Global Expenditure USD



HolonIQ 2019

9 million international students







Things aren't quite what they seem,  
says Alice...







# Andreotti (2011) asks:

One world ideologies, like some renderings of ‘internationalisation’ are premised on universalisms that are transhistorical, transcultural, and transracial.

Andreotti asks, for example, ‘...where does one speak from as a global citizen or global educator’? (p. 307).

And how might we recognise boundaries, flows, and power relations, when we speak from somewhere, whose situated politics of place are made invisible by ‘homogenising universalisms’ (p. 308)?





What projects, processes  
and politics are made  
invisible when higher  
education transnational  
mobility is understood  
through the prism of  
(normative)  
internationalism?

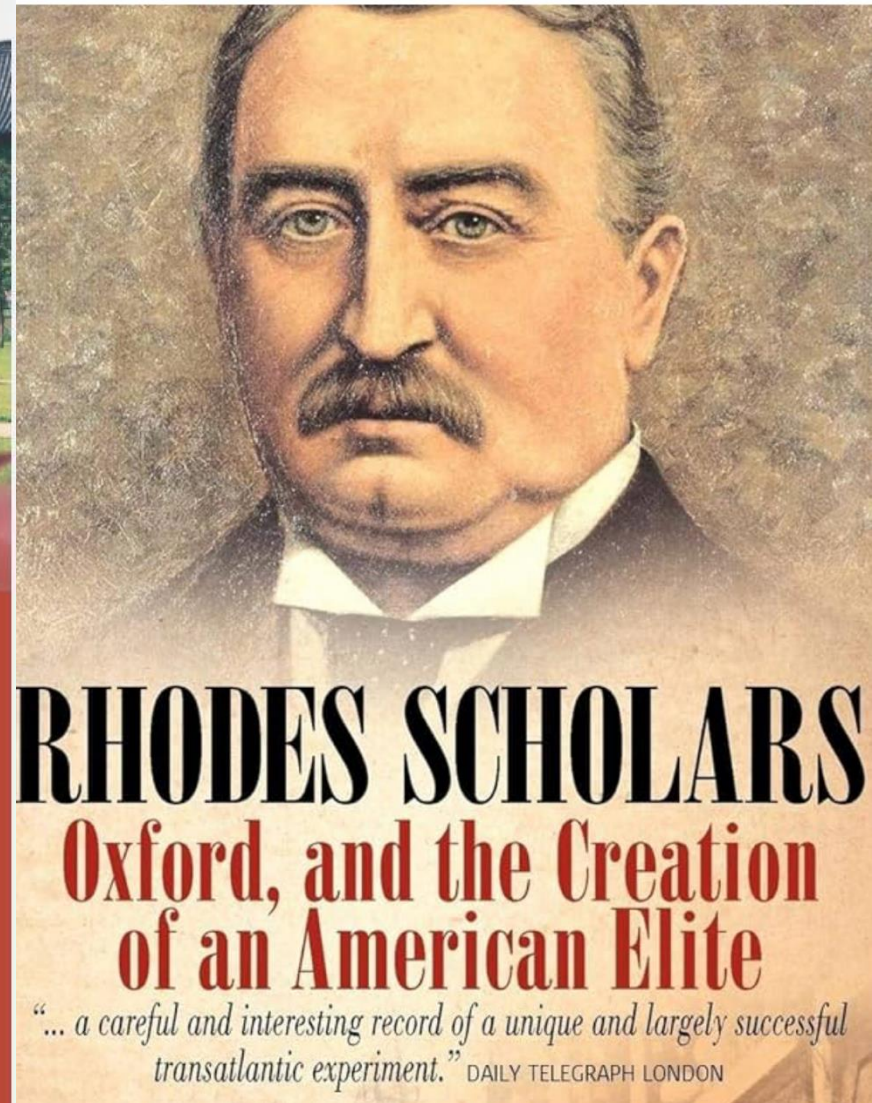




# Empires *of* Ideas

Creating *the* Modern University *from*  
Germany *to* America *to* China

WILLIAM C. KIRBY



# RHODES SCHOLARS Oxford, and the Creation of an American Elite

"... a careful and interesting record of a unique and largely successful  
transatlantic experiment." DAILY TELEGRAPH LONDON

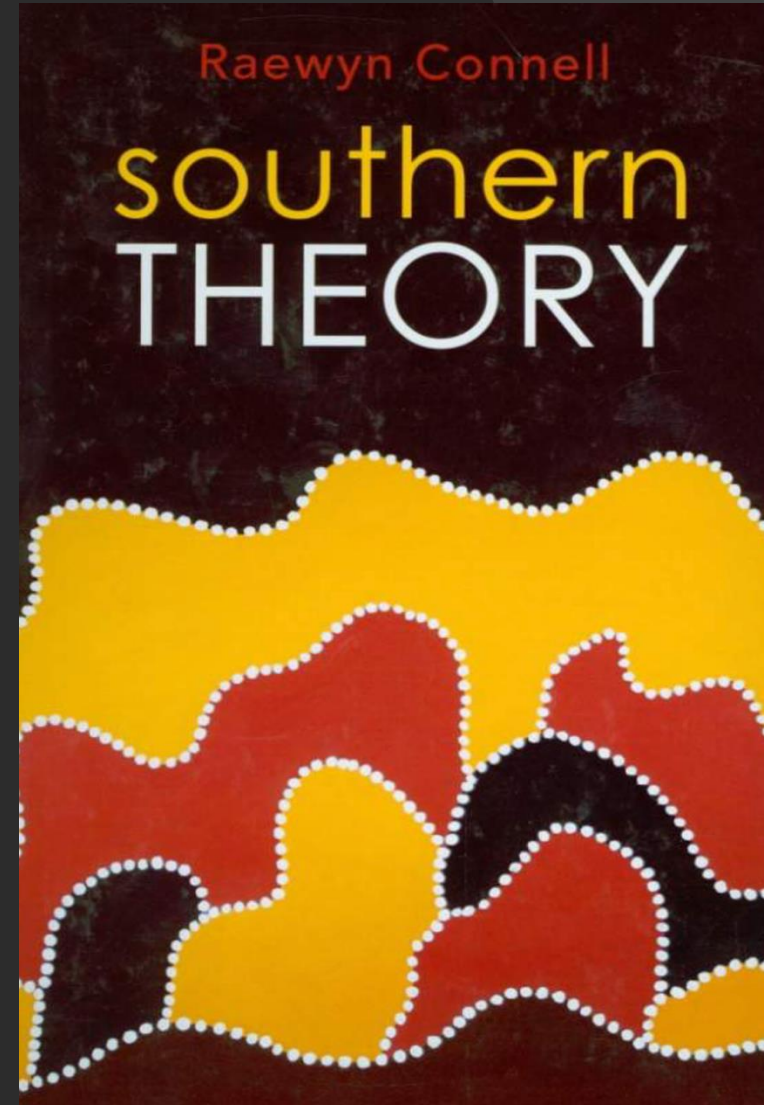
Empires, Elites, Ideas, Intellectuals, Movements...



# Wandering Scholars, Empires of Ideas...

At the Home Universities Conference in London in 1924, philosopher, A.N. Whitehead, spoke of the need to revive “...one of the best institutions of the Middle Ages, the wandering scholar” (ibid).

Whitehead hoped the universities of Great Britain might replicate this tradition by establishing “...something which could be understood because of its uniformity, even of nomenclature, in every country which looks in any way to Great Britain as a centre of culture” (Pietsch, 2010, p. 377).





# ...Scientific Integration

Transnational mobility programmes for scholars did not always have explicit imperial intentions.

Jöns (2007) shows how Germany's Humboldt fellowship programme, established in 1953, was aimed at the reintegration of Germany into the scientific community following World War II; an exemplary case of science diplomacy.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century German universities were regarded as leading the world; Germany's descent from a nation of "poets and thinkers" to one of "judges and hangman" (Kirby 2022, 43) came at the cost of its leadership in higher education.

# and the shaping of a new global elite...

China has supported the establishment of its own Rhodes Scholars equivalent in 2016; the prestigious Schwarzman Scholarship with a dedicated building and community on Tsinghua University campus in Beijing (Kirby, 2022).



Schwarzman Scholars  
Announces Class of 2024-2025:  
Incoming Scholars from 43  
Countries to Join Growing  
Network of 1,000+ Young  
Global Leaders

December 6, 2023



How might we make sense of these developments, their dynamics, and outcomes?

Some (by no means exhaustive) propositions....

01

Benign, or a  
form of  
imperialism  
?

02

Global  
citizen or  
global  
consumer?

03

Services  
sector or  
global  
public  
goods?

04

Proprietary  
knowledge  
or global  
commons?

05

Nation or  
cosmopolitan  
?



# Comparing transnational mobility and imperialisms...



Political imperialism “...a form of political control of foreign lands that does not entail conquest, occupation and permanent foreign rule” (Steinmetz, 2013, p. 10).



Economic imperialism - capitalism's restless and ongoing search for investment opportunities, raw materials, the creation of new markets and sources of lower labour costs outside of its own national boundaries.



Cultural imperialism - a cultural complex of hegemony that seeks to assert a way of thinking, being and becoming (Said, 1994).



Cultural imperialism – mobilised in some cases to legitimise ongoing economic and political domination/ exploitation.



## UK'S TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITY TOPOLOGY



**Figure 1.** UK's Transnational mobility Topology.  
(Sources: authors image; policies and statistics from Project Atlas, 2020; HM Government, 2022; Studying-in-UK, Universities UK, 2022)

## CHINA'S TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITY TOPOLOGY



**Figure 2.** China's transnational mobility Topology.  
(Project Atlas, 2020, Ye, 2023; Sources: authors image, figures from Belt Road Portal, 2019).

## ***UK: Shadows of Empire, and Economic Imperialism***

*International Education Strategy: Global Potential, Global Growth (2019):*

*The UK has a world-class education offering a global reputation and a strong presence in international markets. Our higher education institutions are amongst the most renowned and prestigious in the world. ...They make an important contribution to economic growth, helping to generate the investment and the jobs the UK needs. There are also wider benefits that come from broadening the UK's soft power. In strengthening our international collaboration, we can help to tackle global challenges like poverty, and, in turn, strengthen our national security. The global education market is developing quickly. Whilst this changing market offers many opportunities to the UK, our ambitious competitors are also galvanised to action (HM Government 2019, p. 2).*



The dominant lexicon of the 2019 Strategy is revealing: 'markets', 'international markets', 'investment', 'soft power' and 'competitors'.



Their *International Education Strategy: 2021 Update* (HM Government, 2021), written as a response to Covid-19 and the ensuing radical disruptions to transnational mobility, contain 36 references to markets, this time collocated with words like 'priority markets', 'barriers', campaigns such as 'Study UK', 'growth opportunities', the 'dangers of complacency' in established markets such as China, and ramping up the 'sale value of the ed-tech market'.

# Breaking: UK Graduate Route reduced to 18 months under immigration white paper

The UK government has announced major changes as it releases its immigration white paper – including a shorter Graduate Route and stricter compliance rules.



by **Kim Martin**

May 12 2025 

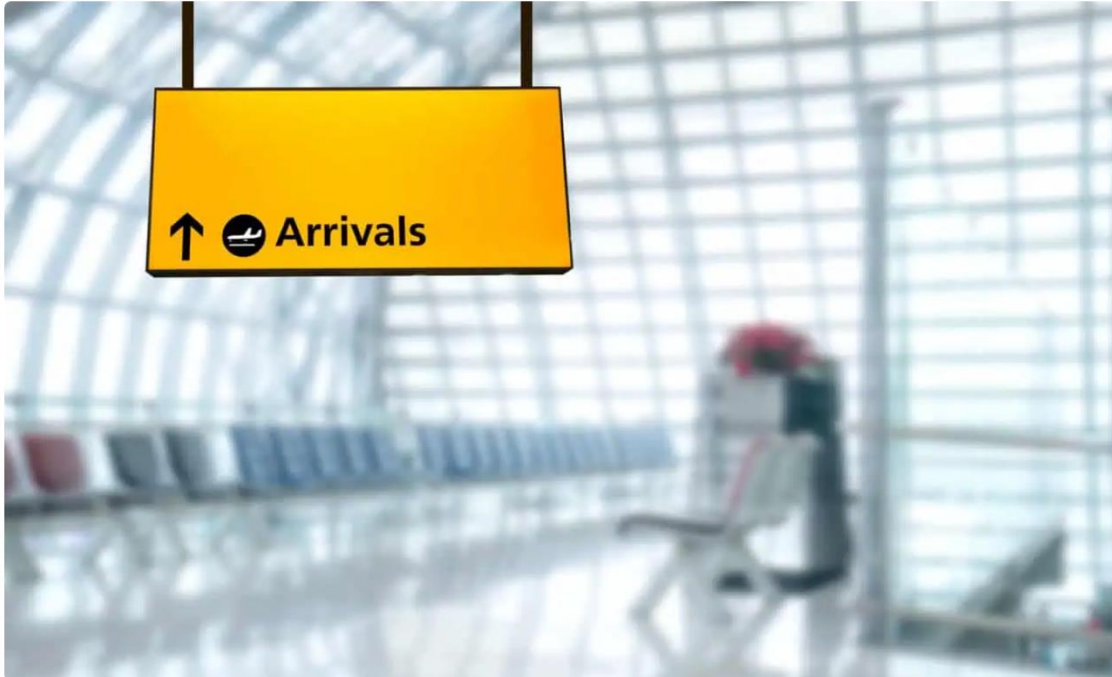
5 Min Read 



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Opinion





# ***China: Rising Power, and Nascent Political and Cultural Imperialism?***

The 2019 *Annual Report on the Development of China's Higher Education* (Chen & Zheng, 2019) identifies five dynamics driving expansion of international students in China.

- growth of the Chinese economy, fuelling growth in HE investment;
- incremental internationalisation of Chinese universities;
- a coherent national strategy articulated in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI);
- deployment of consecutive BRI-related education initiatives by the Ministry of Education and provincial education bureaus, and
- deepening economic ties between BRI countries, stimulating interest in Chinese as a foreign language along with discipline specialisation.

Although BRI is touted as a win-win cooperation, there is no doubt that it is China who leads the herd, as indicated in Xi's speech at the UN conference in Geneva: *"Let Chinese civilisation, together with the colourful civilisations created by people all over the world, provide correct spiritual guidance and strong spiritual motivation for mankind"* (Xi, 2017).





The concept of 'tell the China story well' (*Jianghao Zhongguo Gushi*) is an epistemological concept - propagates empire discourse of a Community of Shared Future for Humankind (*Renlei Mingyun Gongtongti*).



This vision catapults BRI to a higher moral, ideal, finds a parallel symbolic significance in the founding principle of United States foreign policy, 'Manifest Destiny' (Yu, 2019).



These two discursive concepts, 'tell the China story well' and 'community of shared future', link people, ideology and geography.



The assumption underlying 'tell China's story well' projects China as being misunderstood by the world as a global rising power and a feasible alternative to the West-dominated world order.

UK transnational HE mobility continues to draw on the imprint of Empire to advance relations of **economic** and **cultural** imperialism.

In China's case of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), economic imperialism, less clear.

But BRI underpinned by the reassertion of the superiority and universality of Chinese civilisation, rooted in the concept of 'tianxia' ('all under heaven') (Kumar, 2022). This suggests a nascent **political** and **cultural** imperialism at work.



Profit versus commons ...

The image features a central graphic of a human head silhouette filled with a blue circuit board pattern. The head is positioned over a background that is split vertically: the left side shows the stars of the American flag, and the right side shows the stars of the Chinese flag. The letters 'A.I.' are prominently displayed in white with black outlines, centered over the head silhouette.

A.I.

China VS USA

## The U.S. is the frontrunner in AI...



U.S. AI start-ups have received \$8 billion more in venture capital and private equity funding than did those in China.



U.S. software and computer service firms spent three times more on R&D than did those in China and the EU combined.



The United States has at least 62 firms developing AI chips, compared with 29 firms in China and 14 in the European Union.



## ...but China is challenging its lead



China has nearly twice as many supercomputers ranked in the top 500 for performance as the United States.



China has surpassed the EU as the global leader in AI publications, and its research quality continues to increase every year.



## ...and the EU is falling behind.



The EU has fallen further behind the United States in terms of the number of funding deals, acquisitions of AI firms, and AI firms that have raised at least \$1 million in funding.

Find out more in "Who is Winning the AI Race: China, the EU, or the United States—2021 Update" available on [datainnovation.org](https://datainnovation.org).



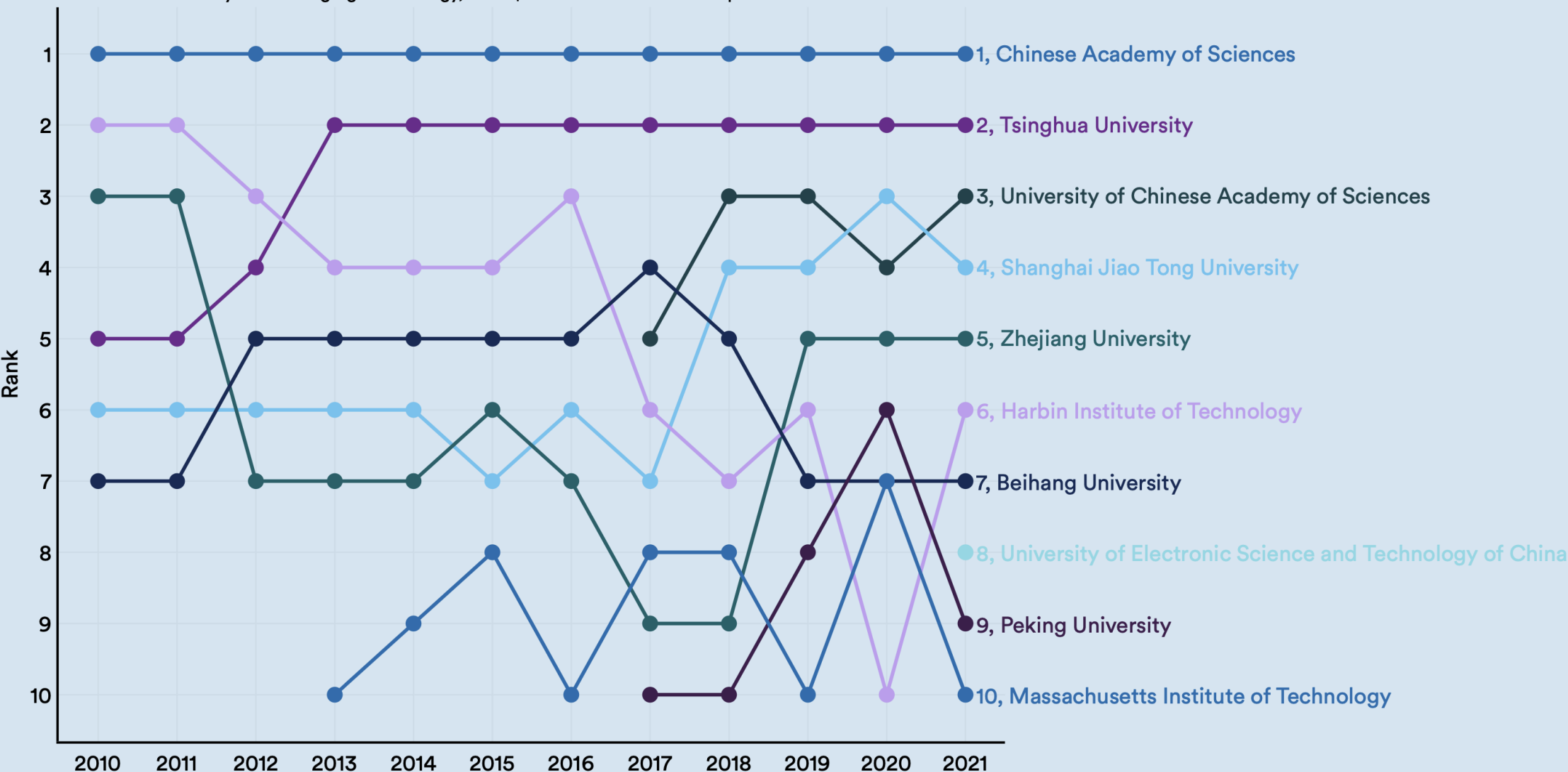
Takeaways from "Who is Winning the AI Race? — 2021 Update"  
– Center for Data Innovation

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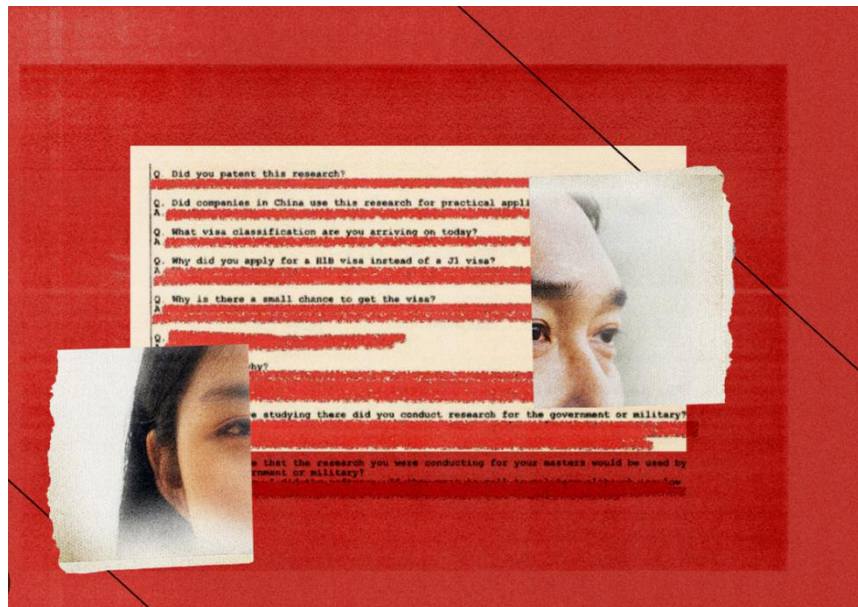


# Top Ten Institutions in the World in 2021 Ranked by Number of AI Publications in All Fields, 2010–21

Source: Center for Security and Emerging Technology, 2022 | Chart: 2023 AI Index Report



Aggressive security checks....



China accuses US of 'harassing' Chinese students and trying to turn them into spies | The Star







*Why and how have these new relationships between economy and security become important at this particular time?*

We need to pay attention to structural and strategic changes taking place internally in national settings as a result of recalibrations and reordering of social forces, interests and struggles, and how these play out within *and* beyond of the nation state (see Jayasuriya 2021; Hung, 2024).

This includes transformations in the state, the relations amongst social classes, new forms of racialised inequality, the dominance of fractions of capital such as finance, rising big tech, aid dependencies, colonial legacies, and so on.

Dialectical thinking encourages us to explore the ongoing tensions, contradictions, and contingencies of a world in motion.

‘Nation’ versus multiculturalism...





East Core

Science Center

Residential College 1

Campus Green

Residential College 2

Main Entry

West Core

Yale-NUS  
Future Expansion

Residential College 3

SINGAPORE GLOBAL SCHOOLHOUSE  
SINGAPORE GLOBAL SCHOOLHOUSE

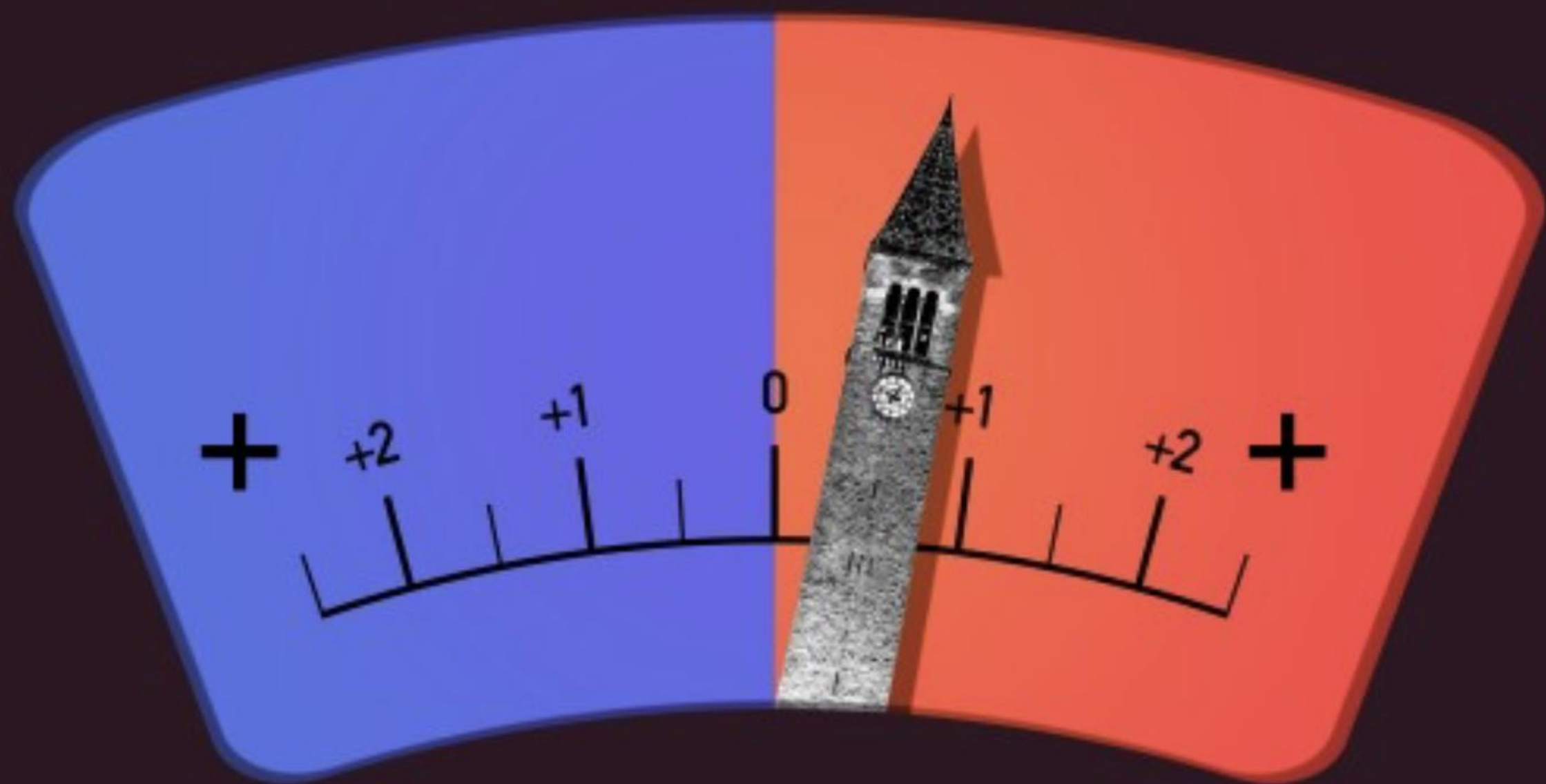






Peter Thiel funded Seasteading Institute





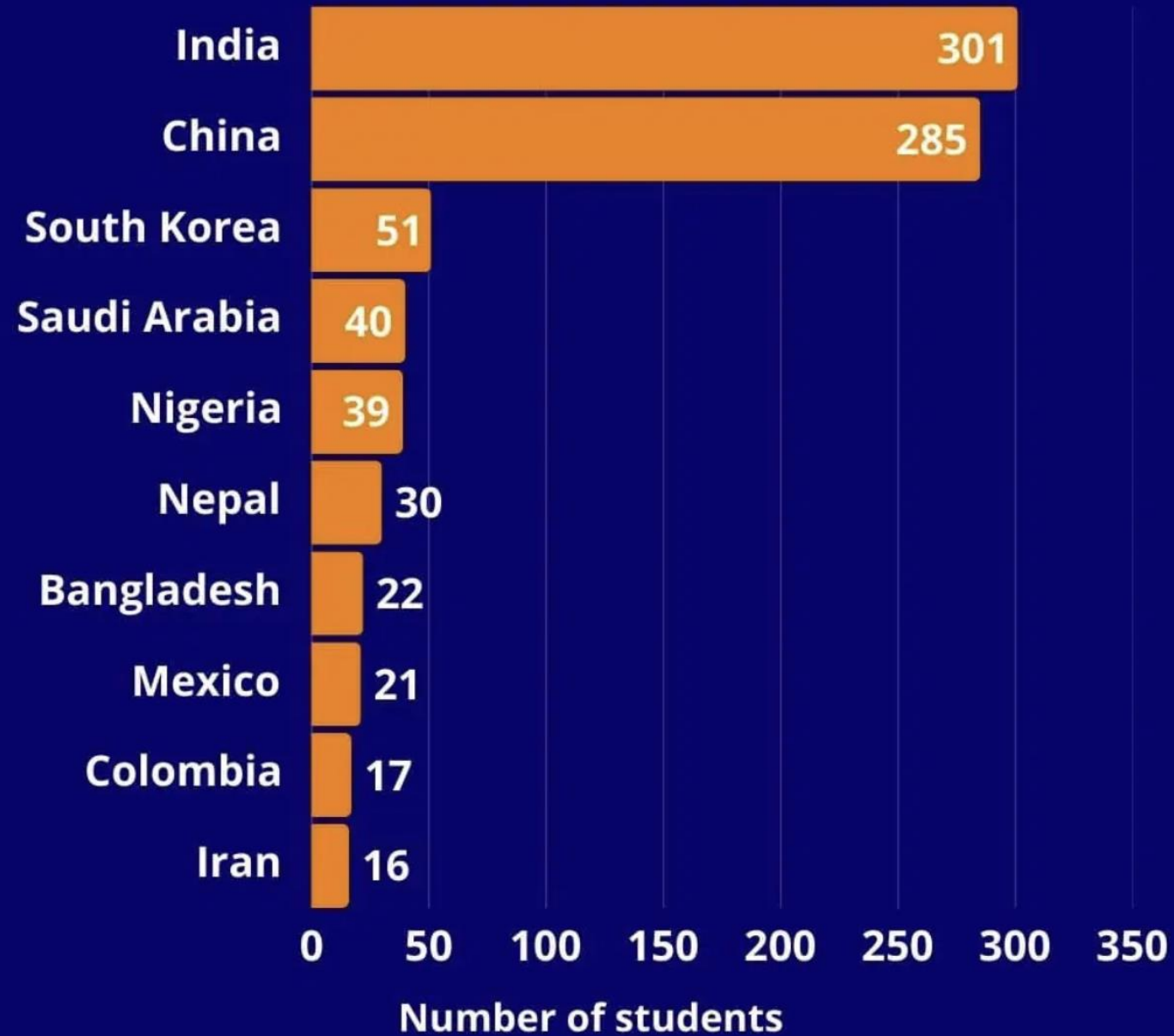


PROTEST  
IS NOT A  
CRIME



States PSC 1121 Physical Science ENC 1101 Writing and Rhetoric I ANT 2240 Honors  
Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion LAH 1093 Latin America: A Cross-Cultural  
History MAS 3105 Linear Algebra EEX 2091 R: Disability and Society PHI 2630  
Ethical Issues and Life Choices WOH 2030 The Modern World Since 1815  
LIT 2040 Introduction to Drama AFA 2000 Intro to African-American Studies  
MMC 2000 Introduction to Mass Media SYG 2220 Introduction to Gender Studies  
ANT 3451 Anthropology of Race and Ethnicity MUH 3053 American Roots Music  
CLT 3370 Classical Mythology SYG 2442 Sociology of Sport SPC 2608 Public  
Speaking CLV 2100 The History of Earth and Life IDS 2672 Popular Music

## revocations





# Race, IQ and the Silicon Valley Alt-Right

Their position was there was a natural elite and an inflexible hierarchy of hardwired intellectual castes that mapped on to race...with welfare democracy making things worse (Slobodian 2025: 105).



# Conclusions

- Tracing transnational movements in space and over time, is an empirical project that must be attentive to the contradictory entanglements of knowledge, power, politics, statecraft, place and social relations.
- Higher education is deeply implicated in these processes as subject to, and object of, these processes.
- We need to disentangle and 'phenomenological' from the structural/strategic set of processes and outcomes.
- And be attentive to the dynamics of uneven and combined development (Trotsky 1930).



THANKYOU...

