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Lili Yang

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The public good of higher education: a lexical-based comparison of the Chinese and Anglo-American approaches

Lili Yang 

Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong SAR

ABSTRACT

The idea of the public good of higher education is closely related to the political, social and educational cultures in which higher education is embedded. It varies across contexts. However, widely used notions of the ‘public’ aspects of higher education, including the concepts of economic public goods and private goods, conventionally assume Anglo-American state/society/university assemblages. Anglo-American (and more generally, Western) discourses and terms are dominant in scholarship on public policy and higher education. This creates obstacles and lacunae in comparative studies, and employing solely Anglo-American notions can be especially problematic in non-Anglo-American contexts. This paper attempts to move beyond the conventional approach by conducting a lexical-based comparison of the Chinese and Anglo-American approaches to the public aspects of higher education. It identifies and explores key concepts of the public good of higher education in both the Chinese and English languages, establishing similarities and differences. The comparison contributes to a more balanced understanding of the public roles of higher education, illuminates new aspects of ‘public’, and may facilitate mutual understanding between scholars and between the Chinese and Anglo-American higher education systems.

KEYWORDS

The public good; *gong*;
higher education; Chinese;
Anglo-American

Introduction

The paper employs a lexical-based comparison to unpack the Chinese and Anglo-American approaches to the public good of higher education. The purpose is to explore and compare relevant key concepts of the public good of higher education in the Chinese and English languages, and to further look for implications for unpacking similarities and differences between the two approaches.

Higher education plays a public role and produces public goods. However, there is a lack of clarity about what this means (Marginson and Yang 2022). As the idea of public good derives historically from the formation of nation-states and political theories about the state’s responsibilities and obligations (Neubauer 2008), connotations of the public good of higher education are closely related to political and educational cultures, including assumptions of governments’ responsibilities, state-university relations, and the relations between individualism and the collective good (Calhoun 2006; Cheng and Yang 2015).

However, the mainstream of the existing discussions of the public good of higher education primarily assumes the Anglo-American state/society/university assemblages (Marginson 2018; Marginson and Yang 2022). A distinctive example is the influential economic formula raised by Samuelson (1954) of public/private goods, which is based on the imaginary of capitalist societies.

However, problems may arise when societies attempt to employ the Anglo-American-based interpretations of the public good in higher education, particularly in contexts marked by alternative social imaginaries. For example, Samuelson's formula assumes a minimal state that only steps in when the market fails. This assumption is at odds with the state/society/market relations as configured in, say, Nordic social democracies or Chinese socialist society (Marginson and Yang 2022).

Therefore, it is essential to draw on the specific cultures in which higher education is embedded in unpacking the public good of higher education. This is no easy task. Societies may use different languages and ideas to understand and interpret the 'public good'. Not all languages have the equivalence of the English term of 'public good'. As we have argued in a previous paper, the concept of 'public' is not a universal notion and non-English language parallels to that term are often merely approximations to the English meaning (Marginson and Yang 2022). This results in difficulties in understanding relevant higher education phenomena in non-Anglo-American contexts and in conducting comparative analyses.

In part, the misuse of the Anglo-American concepts regarding the public good of higher education in non-Anglo-American contexts reflects the dominance of Anglo-American discourses in higher education worldwide. In part, the use of different languages and ideas reflects fundamental language challenges in exploring and comparing the varied approaches to the public good of higher education across contexts. More details about the Western dominance of discourses and language challenges will be discussed in the third section of the paper. Tackling the Anglo-American dominance of discourses and language challenges becomes the key in unpacking and comparing understandings of the public good of higher education across contexts.

A lexical-based comparison

As such, this paper proposes to employ a lexical-based comparison of the Chinese and Anglo-American approaches to the public good of higher education. As will be shown below, the lexical-based comparison can help tackle language problems in exploring and comparing the public good of higher education across contexts. It takes into account and engages with the contextual and cultural settings of the languages in order to develop concepts and expressions based on their own knowledges and cultures, and then to establish bridges that connect these contextual-specific concepts and expressions with each other, and with global audiences for mutual dialogue and understanding. This lexical-based comparison can further reveal cultural nuances through language and help to reverse the under-privilege of non-Anglo-American knowledges in discussing the public good of higher education.

Language is not only influenced and shaped by culture, but reflects culture. In Brown's (1994, 165) words, 'A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture'. It is thus necessary for comparative studies involving multiple languages to take into account and engage with the contextual and cultural settings of the languages. In linguistics, a lexical exploration often refers to analysis of semantic units for exploring languages, with the objective of investigating connections between different languages (see e.g. King 2000). A Lexical-based comparison is used in this paper to examine contextually and culturally embedded interpretations of key concepts of the public good of higher education in the Chinese and English languages, and then move beyond the specific language in order to build a bridge that connects the two languages. The language bridge consists of a list of key terms in the Chinese and English languages, and acts as a foundation for mutual understanding and conceptual comparison and comparison of higher education phenomena.

The selection of materials is key to the lexical exploration of the key concepts. This paper follows the research scope of Yang (2022, Table 1.1). The selection of materials primarily concerns

the relevance of the materials to the topic of the paper, that is the public good of higher education. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that some other relevant materials may have inevitably been omitted. This is particularly the case for two internally heterogeneous approaches. For example, even within Confucianism of the Chinese approach, the interpretations of the notion of 'public' are not static but have experienced changes in Chinese history. Similarly, there is not a single Anglo-American approach. The connotations and practices of the public good may differ between the United States and United Kingdom. However, in the light of worldwide diversity, and in relation to the fundamental concepts of the public (good) role of higher education explored in this paper, there is more similarity than difference within the Anglo-American and within the Chinese approaches. It is necessary and meaningful to conduct such a comparison while acknowledging the internal variations.

Specifically, this paper has two topics of inquiry: (1) to conduct a comparison of key concepts of the public good of higher education, between the Chinese and Anglo-American approaches; (2) to explore the implications of this comparison for similarities and differences, between China and Anglo-America, in relevant higher education practices and phenomena. The paper first discusses the Chinese and Anglo-American approaches to the public good of higher education. It also critiques the Anglo-American (and more generally, Western) dominance of discourses in higher education, and explores language challenges in higher education studies and in unpacking the public good of higher education. Such discussions demonstrate the rationales for paying attention to language issues and contextual-based concepts. The paper then explores and compares the relevant key concepts of the public good of higher education in the Chinese and English languages. It concludes with the implications of the lexical comparison for further conceptual comparison and comparison of higher education practices and phenomena between the Chinese and Anglo-American approaches.

The Chinese and Anglo-American approaches to the public good of higher education

Both Chinese and Anglo-American approaches have strengths as well as limitations in capturing and explaining the public good in higher education. For example, they are facing conceptual and methodological difficulties. While being successful in terms of capturing economic benefits of higher education, the Anglo-American approach faces difficulty in explaining higher education's non-pecuniary public goods such as social goods and public-related values (Yang 2022). Another limitation of the Anglo-American approach lies in the global dimension. It under-recognises higher education's contributions to the global public good (Marginson 2018).

In contrast, the Chinese approach is more comfortable with higher education's social and cultural goods in addition to economic goods. It draws on a wide range of virtues that higher education may contribute to, such as public-related values, and social cohesion and harmony, though these are often visualised inside the state because of a long history of the state supervising and limiting the communicative social dimension. However, there is a longstanding neglect of the private good in the Chinese approach – that the public-private boundary is blurred (Huang and Jiang 2005, xi; see more below). Meanwhile, since the mid-nineteenth century, the Chinese approach has been experiencing changes and transformations, under the influence of foreign ideologies such as (neo)liberalism and Marxism-Leninism. The Chinese interpretation of the public good of higher education itself remains unclear.

The exploration and comparison of the Chinese and Anglo-American approaches may provide insights into means to deal with the existing problems of the public good of higher education, and enrich the discussion of the public good of higher education with cross-cultural nuances. In addition, considering the importance of the Anglo-American and Chinese higher education systems worldwide, the focus on the two approaches is of global relevance.

Rationales for employing a lexical-based comparison

Language as a major carrier of culture

Language is a part of culture and a major carrier of culture (Brown 1994) and plays important roles in exploring the public good of higher education. Every language form has and carries designative, sociative, denotative, and connotative meanings associated with the culture where the language develops (Nida 1998, 29). Even when using the same language forms, people of different cultures can refer to various things.

In higher education, as will be demonstrated later, the same concept can have various meanings and reflect highly diverging underpinning cultural and philosophical ideas in different languages. Meanwhile, it can be difficult to find the equivalents of concepts of a certain language in another language. Language can be a factor to generate major dilemmas in comparative studies and mutual understanding, especially in the global literature that is dominated by English. As Chilisa (2012, 77–8) argues, the dominance of the English language in academia strengthens the universalisation of theories, concepts, and research methods grounded in Western societies. This reinforces the Western hegemony of knowledge (Krause 2016). As a result, non-Western knowledge systems and ways of knowing are often ignored, marginalised and suppressed in global academic literature and comparative studies (Chilisa 2012).

The Western dominance of discourses in higher education

The existence of Western dominance of discourses in higher education studies is not surprising, considering the sweeping influence of the Western approaches to higher education throughout the world (Yang 2011). Underlying the passion for imitating Western higher education practices is the dominance of Western political, economic, and educational cultures and thoughts in global higher education. These cultures and thoughts are primarily derived from the contexts of the Hellenic-Judeo-Christian heritage of Europe and the European settler states. For example, there are certain widely adopted theories and lenses in explaining higher education phenomena, including human capital theory; Bourdieu's notions of field of power, agency, positioned and position-taking; Samuelson's concepts of public goods; and world-systems theory. These have been generated by Western scholars based on their work on Western societies. A large proportion of these theories and concepts were originally written in English.

Nevertheless, there exist an array of state/society/university assemblages across the world. The attempt to use the dominant thoughts to explain higher education phenomena outside Western societies can fail. Further, the attempt can narrow 'the imaginary of universities and human relationships in general, limiting the possibilities of knowledge and being' (Shahjahan, Ramirez, and Andreotti 2017, S52), privilege Western knowledge over the other in comparative studies, and lead to difficulties in cross-cultural understanding and cooperation in higher education (Yang 2011). How to address the Western dominance and give different cultures 'equal' status in conducting comparative studies of higher education is an urgent question to be discussed.

Language challenges in discussing higher education phenomena in non-Western contexts

Among all of the economic, political and social reasons for the dominance of Western thoughts in higher education studies, the use of the English language as a global academic language deserves particular attention (Flowerdew and Li 2009). First, higher education concepts in a certain language often carry underlying cultural and philosophical ideas and assumptions that are embedded in a specific state/society/university assemblage (Marginson and Yang 2022). The cultural baggage carried by the concepts may confine its use in another context. Nevertheless, there is often a lack of awareness of the baggage carried by English concepts among researchers in employing the

concepts in non-Western higher education contexts. In other words, researchers often use English (or more broadly Western) concepts and thoughts as a universal lens to explain higher education phenomena, without enough attention to the appropriateness of using those concepts and thoughts in non-Western contexts.

Second, there is a lack of discussion about non-Western concepts in the global higher education literature (Semali and Kincheloe 1999, 15). Even when there exist such discussions, the non-English, especially, non-Western concepts are less recognised and used. This reflects the largely unilateral flow of knowledge from the West to the rest of the world via the medium of English, not *vice versa* (Semali and Kincheloe 1999; Yang 2022). More research is needed that focuses on developing concepts and thoughts by fully embedding in non-Western contexts. Indigenous knowledge can play an essential role: concepts, including their cultural associations and images, raised from indigenous knowledge need to be fully discussed in comparative studies (Yang 2011), with appropriate attention to possible challenges caused by language translation. This leads to the third point.

Third, it is difficult for researchers to conduct comparative studies without changing connotations and denotative uses of concepts after translation, especially when comparison concern nonmaterial traits and require language as the medium (Osgood 1964). In part, not all concepts in a language have direct equivalent translations in another language (Sadiq 2010). Even with equivalent translations in another language, the original concepts' functions can be different to that of the translations. In addition, owing to different cultures underlying different languages, many concepts have their unique connotations and denotative uses in a certain language (Osgood 1964), and their uniqueness would be lost after being translated into another language. Difficulties and problems in translation issues have long been studied by linguistics (Lucy 1994). However, they are less aware of researchers doing comparative studies of higher education.

Thus, in explorations and comparisons of higher education topics that involve non-English languages, at least three issues are relevant: the awareness of the cultural baggage carried by relevant key concepts, the embeddedness in local contexts in order to find or develop contextual-based concepts and explanations of higher education phenomena, and the special attention to language translation when comparing contextual-based concepts and explanations.

Comparing key concepts of the public good of higher education in Chinese and English

This section compares certain relevant key concepts of the public good of higher education in Chinese and English. This comparison follows three steps. The first step identifies relevant key contextual- and cultural-based concepts in the Chinese and English languages with regard to the public good of higher education. The second step respectively examines the identified key concepts in each language/context, including the ideas and assumptions underlying the concepts; and interprets the key concepts in a detailed way in another language. The third step discusses the issue of 'fit' and the degree of overlap. Implications of the comparison of concepts for comparing the Chinese and Anglo-American approaches to the public good of higher education are discussed in the next section.

As previously discussed, the connotations of the public good vary across contexts. In Anglo-American frameworks, the public is often used in the public/private dualism (Marginson 2018; see also below). In liberal political theory, 'public' and 'private' refer to the state-owned and non-state-owned; in liberal economic theory, the term 'public goods' is used to represent goods that are non-rivalrous and non-excludable (Samuelson 1954). This is further discussed below.

However, the Chinese approximations of 'public' and 'private' – *gong* and *si* – contain different connotations and are often used differently in Chinese. In the Chinese political culture, 'self' is a key term in seeking to understand *gong* and *si*. The absolute 'self' in the Western sense does not exist in China (Cheng and Yang 2015). Instead, there is co-existence of the 'smaller self' (*xiaowo*)

and 'larger self (*dawo*)' (Cheng and Yang 2015). Smaller self and larger self can refer to relations among individuals' multiple roles. When the role is given by a rather smaller entity, the self is called smaller self, while it is the larger self when the role is about the larger entity. For example, an individual in a family is the smaller self-compared to the family as the larger self. In a pair of the smaller self and the larger self, the smaller self is the *si* whereas the larger self is the *gong*. The *si* and the smaller self is nested within the *gong* and the larger self. There is a normative preference for the *gong* over the *si*. Nevertheless, there are no corresponding terms of 'smaller self' and 'larger self' in English. It can be difficult for English speakers to understand connotations and cultural backgrounds of *gong* and *si* if they are translated as *public* and *private* with no further explanations.

The above example shows the existence of lexical differences and the possibility to misinterpret Chinese concepts in English because of the lexical differences. Similarly, when translating the English concepts of public and private into *gong* and *si* in Chinese, the ideas carried by the original English concepts, including defence of the private, may be lost (see below). The lexical translation problem needs to be addressed in conducting comparative studies on relevant themes. We now move to the lexical-based comparison of the Chinese and Anglo-American approaches to the public good of higher education.

Step I: identifying relevant key contextual-based concepts in both Chinese and English

The first step is to identify key concepts relevant to the public good of higher education in Chinese and English respectively. The two processes of the identification draw independently on the Chinese and Anglo-American political cultures, and attempt to avoid benchmarking against each other. It is necessary to note that the relevant key concepts are not static. New key concepts may emerge in the process of examining the key concepts.

Relevant key concepts in the Chinese approach

As discussed above, *gong*, *si*, *dawo*, and *xiaowo* are key to unpacking the public good of higher education in China. The Chinese concepts of *gong* and *si* reflect the normative preference of *gong* over *si*, demonstrating a collectivist tradition (Marginson and Yang 2022). Concepts of *dawo* and *xiaowo* are related to the Chinese way, especially the Confucian way, of understanding the world – that the world is composed of a series of escalating entities (see Figure 1). This is also known as the Confucian anthropocosmic worldview (Lu and Jover 2019; Tu 1985). For example, the Confucian classic *Book of Rites* describes the process of individual self-cultivation (*xiushen*) as working on the self, then on the family, the state, and ultimately all under heaven (*tianxia*), reflecting the Confucian approach to the constitution of the world.

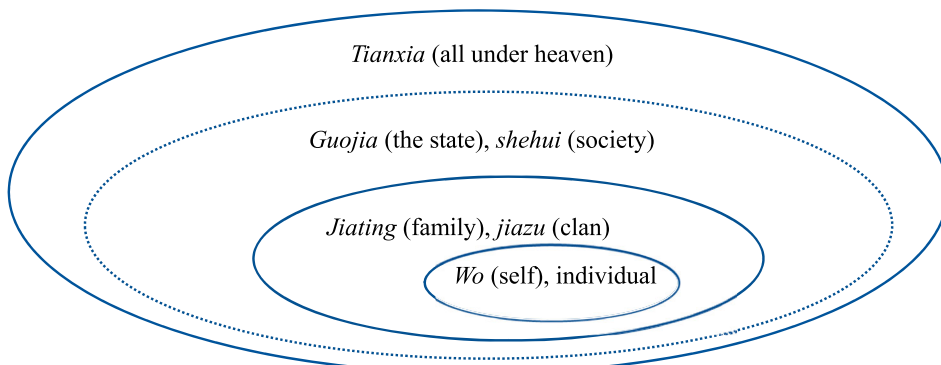


Figure 1. The Confucian anthropocosmic worldview – the escalating entities (after Huang 2005; Tu 1985).

The ancients, who wished to promote illustrious virtue under heaven, began first by securing good government in their country. Wishing to secure good government in their country, they began first by putting their family in order. Wishing to put their family in order, they began first by cultivate themselves.¹

Several important entities in this worldview are key to the discussion of the public good of higher education, which are included as relevant key concepts, including *tianxia* (all under heaven) and *guojia* (the state).² They are examined and interpreted in the next sub-section.

Relevant key concepts in the Anglo-American approach

It is rather straightforward that relevant key concepts in the Anglo-American political culture would include 'public', 'private', 'public goods' and 'private goods'. In addition, in 2015, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) highlights another concept – common goods. The concept of common goods provides an alternate approach to understanding 'public goods' in higher education, intending to go beyond the public/private dualism (Szadkowski 2019; Tian and Liu 2019). Therefore, the concept of the common goods is added as another key concept.

Notably, as this paper is written in English, it is not possible to extensively interpret these English key concepts in Chinese in the main text. As such, the paper uses English to articulate the ideas and assumptions underlying these concepts in the main text, while including the reduced Chinese explanations in Table 2.

Step II: examining the identified key concepts in each language/context and interpret them in the other language

The Chinese key concepts and their explanations

In Chinese, *gong* and *si* have multiple meanings. Before the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BCE), *gong* and *si* were used to describe physical objects such as farming tools and clothing. For example, in 'Bo wu wo si, bo huan wo yi' (meaning 'I will wash my private clothes clean, and I will rinse my robes')³, *si* means clothes. It was after the Spring and Autumn period that the two concepts started to contain abstract and metaphysical meanings (Huang 2005). The Confucian scholar Xunzi (313-238 BCE) argues that 'only those who can restrain their private wills could serve the public'⁴ and become a *daru* (erudite and virtuous scholars). Here private refers to private wills, and public means the public righteousness and welfare. Since then, *gong* can refer to specific non-individual collective spheres including *jiating* (family) and *guojia* (the state), or humanity as a whole. It also has normative meanings (e.g. justice, righteousness, virtue), some of which parallel to those of the English concept of 'public', including common, universal, open, and fair. Similarly, *si* may be understood as individual, personal, and secret; or normatively, as selfish. Li Gefei (around 1045-105) uses the notion of *yiji zhisi*, literally meaning one's own selfish personal interests, to describe the individual's private interests. This notion carries a strong negative connotation of selfishness. The direct Chinese translations of public goods, *gonggong liyi* or *gonggong wupin*, and private goods, *siren liyi* or *siren wupin* (see Tables 1 and 2), are distinct from the idea of *yiji zhisi* and do not reflect the traditional meanings of *gong* and *si*.

Gong and *si* are often used together to indicate the relative relationship between them. This relative relationship between *gong* and *si* is illustrated by a pair of Chinese terms: *dawo* and *xiaowo*. As noted, *xiaowo*, that corresponds to *si*, is located within *dawo*, that corresponds to *gong*, as in nested circles (see Figure 1). The nested *xiaowo* is subordinate to the *dawo* that it nests within. Hence the primacy of *gong* over *si*. Indeed, in Chinese society, there is a normative preference for *gong* over *si*. For example, Si Maguang (1019-1086) argues that people should prioritise *gong* rather than *si*. Neo-Confucian scholars Cheng Yi (1033-1107) and Zhu Xi (1130-1200) claim that *gong* is legal while *si* is illegal. In Cheng's words, 'righteousness and interests, are merely public and private'.⁵ Zhu also argues that 'what a person seeks for is his own epitomizes selfish desire [*si*]; what rite requires represents the justice [*gong*] of heavenly principles'.⁶ In contemporary China, the collectivist tradition of

Table 1. Moving from Chinese concepts to Anglo-American lexicon.

Concept in Chinese	Equivalent, approximation or nearest overlap in Anglo-American thought	Discussion of issues of 'fit' and degree of overlap
公 <i>Gong</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public; common. Justice; for all's benefits; altruism and selfless spirit; openly; equally divided. State; social; international; official. Male; Duke. 	There are no explicit explanations of <i>gong</i> in Chinese, similar to 'public' in English. It has different meanings in varied situations. Need to discuss based on contexts.
私 <i>Si</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Private; selfish; secret; personal. 	There are no explicit explanations of '公' in Chinese, similar to 'public' in English. It has different meanings in varied situations. Need to discuss based on contexts.
天下 <i>Tianxia</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All under heaven; everything on earth (including human beings, living creatures, natural resources ...); a Chinese way of viewing the world. * All under heaven belongs to/is for all (<i>tianxia weigong</i>): people's pursuit of universal love, which includes fairness between others and oneself, so that people are able to overlook specific differences in reality and seek an ideational and abstract equality. 	'All under heaven' is the direct translation from Chinese. The English overlap is an explanation of the original Chinese term. Thus a high degree of overlap.
国家 <i>Guojia</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Country; the civilisational state; the family state. The state paralleling with the modern nation-state. 	There may be confusions caused when using the term <i>guojia</i> , as it can be used both as the family state and the civilisational state in a traditional Chinese sense, and the modern nation-state because of the Western impacts on China. The nearest overlap needs to be used with caution.

prioritising *gong* over *si* is also held up by the official ideology Marxism (Marginson and Yang 2022). However, although Chinese intellectuals including Confucius (551-479 BCE) and Mencius (372-289 BCE) stress to differentiate *gong* and *si*⁷, in the Chinese political culture, the boundary between

Table 2. Moving from Anglo-American concepts to Chinese lexicon.

Anglo-American concept	Equivalent, approximation or nearest overlap in Chinese thought	Discussion of issues of 'fit' and degree of overlap
Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 公, 公众, 公开; 公共的, 公众的, 政府的, 非市场的, 公用的, 公开的 	Large overlaps of connotations. The Chinese interpretations can effectively explain the English terms. However, new Chinese ideas may be added to the English terms that are not included in the original terms. For example, 'secretly' and 'selfishness' may be added to the term of 'private'.
Private	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 私, 私人, 私下; 私人的, 私立的, 个人的, 秘密的, 自私的 	
Public goods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 公共利益; 公共物品; 国有利益/物品 	The connotation of the Chinese translations is narrower that only refers to economic and political meanings.
Private goods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 私人利益; 私人物品; 商业产品和服务 	
Common goods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 共同利益; 共同物品, 公益; 公用资源 	These are Chinese translations of the English concepts. Thus a high degree of overlap.

gong and *si* is ambiguous (Huang and Jiang 2005, xi). The ambiguity is largely embodied in the long-standing neglect of *si*, and has resulted in a lack of protection of *si*. This is in contrast with the Anglo-American political culture's defence of the private (see below). Such ambiguity and the preference of *gong* explain the state-university relationship in China, as reflected in the comprehensive state tradition and the view of having higher education as an apparatus of the state. See more discussion on this below.

Tianxia is the traditional Chinese term to refer to the world. In the Confucian anthropocosmic worldview, *tianxia*, literally meaning all under heaven, is the largest entity and the supreme *gong*. *Tian* means heaven in Chinese. It is also closely related to worship in the Chinese political culture and refers to the highest supernatural force. As *the Book of History* notes, '*tian* (heaven) trusts and blesses the people'.⁸ Building on *tian*, *tianxia* represents all creatures and things under heaven. This is a material description of the world. Meanwhile, *tianxia* also contains abstract connotations and reflects the Confucian ultimate ideal of bringing peace and harmony to the world. *The Book of Rites* writes,

When the Way prevails, all under heaven is for and belongs to all, in which the selection criteria are wisdom and ability. Mutual confidence is promoted and good neighbourliness is cultivated. Humans do not regard as parents only their own parents, nor do they treat as children only their own children ... They despise indolence, yet they do not use their energies for their own interests. In this way selfish scheming are repressed ... This is called the Great Harmony (*datong*).⁹

In part, relevant to the status of the highest supernatural force of *tian*, *tianxia* reflects the belief that heaven is above all and controls all, as expressed in *the Book of History*, 'Xi and He were ordered to strictly follow heaven, calculate the rule of the sun, moon and stars, formulate a calendar, and inform people of the time and seasons'.¹⁰ In part, *tianxia* is often related to the idea of *tianxia weigong* (all under heaven belongs to/is for all), in which case *tianxia* is a symbolic ideal, suggesting the idea of 'no other' and a universal civilisational order (Xu 2017; Zhao 2009; see above the quote from *the Book of Rites*). This 'no other' approach to the world marks a significant difference between the Chinese and the Anglo-American approaches, and points to a new way to discuss and rethink global higher education as a whole (see below).

Guojia, whose modern English translation is state, contains two Chinese characters: *guo* and *jia*. *Guo* means country; *jia* means family, reflecting the understanding of *guojia* through family in China. The traditional connotations of *guojia* is different from the modern nation-state. As King (2018, 111) argues, 'ancient China, of course, was a nation, but in a sense very different from the modern "nation-state"'. Scholars argue that the intrinsic nature of *guojia* is essentially the same as that of the family (Xu 2017, 2). Using Mencius's words, 'People often mention the following three together: all under heaven, the state, and the family. The root of all under heaven is in the state. The root of a state is in the family'.¹¹

In addition to the family state idea, *guojia* may also be understood as 'the civilisational state' (see e.g. Jacques 2012; King 2018; Zhang 2012). For example, the contemporary Chinese scholar Zhang (2012) describes the Chinese state as a civilisational state. The civilisational state has two distinctive attributes. Firstly, the longevity of Chinese civilisation (Jacques 2012). Secondly, there is a lack of explicit boundaries, reflecting the comprehensiveness of the Imperial Chinese state – the 'no other' idea of *tianxia* (Jacques 2012; Zhao 2009).

The family state and civilisational state were interrelated with each other – in imperial times, the emperors' family was believed to be the legitimate interpreter and representative of the Chinese civilisation and *tianxia*, as reflected in Mencius' words above. In other words, *guojia* converged with *tianxia* in imperial times. This explains the ambiguous boundary between *guojia* and *tianxia* in Figure 1. Notably, the convergence of *guojia* and *tianxia* also reflects a tradition of having a comprehensive state that takes in all under heaven and a blurring boundary between the state and society in China¹², whose legacies are still salient in contemporary China (Marginson and Yang 2022; see more in the next section).

The above key concepts are essential in interpreting the public good of higher education in China. For example, the normative preference of *gong* over *si* forms the foundation of prioritising the public good over private good in higher education in China, which is partly manifest in the emphasis on higher education's roles in serving the national missions. This also helps to explain the family's willingness to invest in children's education and a general expectation of children's 'paying-back' to the family afterwards, as embodied in the notion of '*guangzong yaozu* (bring glory to one's ancestors and family)'. The notion of *tianxia* reflects a Chinese way of imagining the world, and may have important implications for discussing global higher education especially the relational dimension. The ideas of the family state and civilisation state are essential to understanding the state-university relations and systemic governance of higher education in China. More will be discussed in the next section.

The English key concepts and their explanations

Similar to the Chinese *gong*, the English concept of public also has multiple meanings. In general, public may be interpreted in two ways: the public/private dualism and the inclusive communicative public (Marginson and Yang 2022). In this paper, private is primarily examined in the public/private dualism.

The pairing of public/private is often used as an analytical device in English, with two usages. One is the political usage, in which public refers to state or government, for example, in the expression of 'public sector'. In this usage, private refers to non-state sector including spheres of individual, family, and the market. In higher education, public universities are often distinguished from non-state private universities. Underlying the political form are the idea of having a democratic state and the anti-statist defence of private institutions. Correspondingly, public goods refer to the government-owned or -produced goods, whereas private goods stand for goods owned or produced by private agents and institutions.

The other is the economic usage. Here private represents the market. Private goods are those produced in economic markets, following the law of the market. Samuelson (1954) argues that public goods have two attributes: non-excludability and non-rivalry. When benefits of goods cannot be confined to single buyers, these goods are non-excludable – take clean air as an example. When goods can be consumed by any number of individuals without being depleted, these goods are non-rivalrous. The production of public goods needs to be supported by the state as they cannot be effectively produced by the market (Samuelson 1954).

Following the above understandings, higher education today is *de facto* viewed primarily as a producer of private goods in Anglo-America. Its potential and role of contributing to the public good are downplayed. This is further enhanced by the methodological individualism that understands public goods as an accumulation of private goods. Coupled with the neoliberal influence, the public investment in higher education is decreasing and higher education is gradually losing its commitment to the public good. Because of the Anglo-American influence on Chinese higher education, the economic definition of public goods is widely used in higher education in both Anglo-American and Chinese contexts (Tian and Liu 2019). However, it should be noted that there is a capitalist assumption of society underlying this definition – that society is composed of two parts. The two parts are the market setting where private property and commodities are exchanged, and the non-market setting where government-owned property is organised (Marginson and Yang 2022). The state only steps in when the market fails, following the idea of having a limited liberal state. Problems may arise when non-capitalist societies attempt to employ this Anglo-American concept of public goods in higher education.

Public may also be used in inclusive universal public. In this case, public can refer to a universal and inclusive social space, as in 'public opinion' and 'public communication'. The communicative inclusive public imagines a shared inclusive space – the sphere of free communication – in which agents are related and communicate in the forms of expression, communication, and electoral behaviours (Marginson and Yang 2022; Calhoun 1993). It is relational and network-based, a shared space in the sense of a universal assembly, though methods of how this public is constructed can vary

across contexts. In the French approach, this relational inclusive public is state constructed in many respects. In Anglo-American approach, it is partly constructed by commercial agents represented by social media platforms. Universities are often referred to as a public sphere, highlighting its autonomy from the state and responsibility to provide independent opinions (Calhoun 2006).

In the Anglo-American approach, the communication sphere is informed by the emphasis on liberty, especially freedom of thought and expression, as well as the idea of inclusive and grass-roots democracy. While the public/private dualism centres on distinguishing in zero-sum fashion between the scope of public and the scope of private, the communicative inclusive public universally embraces all agents, including all that are 'private'. There is no wholly independent 'private' when 'public' is interpreted as 'the communicative inclusive public', partly paralleling with the Chinese idea of *tianxia weigong*. Public sphere in Habermas's (1989) sense may be an ideal type of communication sphere.

'Common goods' is closer to the communicative inclusive public than the public/private dualism and moves beyond communication to include collective action. Many scholars/researchers recognise the problems associated with the concepts of economic and governmental public goods, and suggest the use of 'common goods' rather than public goods to discuss higher education's collective contributions (see e.g. Locatelli 2019; UNESCO 2015). Here 'common goods' suggests joint activity by a wide array of agents engaged in both defining and producing common goods, respects the potential for diverse interpretations in practice, based on differing cultural contexts, and has a normative orientation in favour of collective welfare. Dupré (1994, 173) defines common goods as goods 'proper to, and attainable only by the community, yet individually shared by its members'. Recently, there is a growing body of literature that calls for re-organising higher education following the common good idea. For example, in a previous study, we proposed five material manifestations of the common good in higher education: widening participation, promoting social cohesion and democracy, promulgating a global knowledge system, promoting a sense of embeddedness in a global community, and designing and implementing common-good oriented financial models for higher education (Yang, Brotherhood, and Chankseliani 2022, 8).

Gong is the nearest overlap of public, and *si* of private in Chinese. As noted, the widely used Chinese translations of public goods are *gonggong liyi* or *gonggong wupin*, and of private goods are *siren liyi* or *siren wupin*, though these translations merely capture economic and political definitions of public goods and private goods. The recently noticed term common goods may be translated as *gongtong liyi* or *gongtong wupin*. These Chinese translations are new arrivals in the Chinese language and are distinct from the Chinese idea of *gong* and *si* and goods of *gong* and *si*. More is discussed in the next sub-section.

Step III: discussing the issue of 'fit' and the degree of overlap

Despite the fact that the Anglo-American approach is well known in China and key English concepts have been translated into Chinese, comparatively little has been done in interpreting key Chinese concepts into English, making the comparison potentially unbalanced. For example, the Chinese translations of English concepts of state (*guojia*) and world (*shijie*) can often effectively capture their English connotations, as their Chinese translations are modern arrivals in the Chinese language, much influenced by English concepts and Japanese translations. Typical examples would also include the Chinese translations of public goods, private goods, and common goods: *gonggong liyi/wupin*, *siren liyi/wupin*, *gongtong liyi/wupin*. Many of these Chinese translations are created to exclusively refer to the meanings of corresponding English concepts, with no roots in the Chinese political culture. Nevertheless, there do not exist English concepts that can effectively embrace the ideas of the Chinese concept of *guojia* and *tianxia*. In other words, in many cases, the Chinese terms are broader than their English approximations, containing both their original Chinese meanings as well as ideas carried by the English approximations. This points to the need to articulate the specific use of a certain Chinese concept in context.

In addition, there are also cases where certain ideas carried by the original English concepts are lost in their Chinese translations. *Gong* and *si* are often used as the Chinese translations of the English notions of public and private, and *vice versa*. There are large overlaps between *gong* and public, and between *si* and private. However, the large overlaps between *gong* and public and between *si* and private do not mean that they can be used interchangeably without caution. On the one hand, there are no explicit definitions of *gong* and *si* in Chinese. Neither do public and private in English. The interpretations of these terms, both in their own language and in the other language, may need to consider the contexts. On the other hand, *gong* and *si* are not Chinese equivalents of public and private, and *vice versa*. For example, as noted, there are distinct attitudes towards the relationships between *gong* and *si*, and between public and private. Arguably, underlying the distinct attitudes are the collectivist tradition in China and the individualistic tradition in Anglo-America, which are key in understanding the social and political structures in China and Anglo-America (see more in the next section). Further, compared to public, *gong* may also contain normative values including justice and altruism. Details about the issue of ‘fit’ and the degree of overlap are also included in Tables 1 and 2.

Tables 1 and 2 summarise an instrument that has been developed as a result of the comparison of concepts. It can also serve as a basis for further conceptual comparison and comparison of relevant higher education phenomena (see also below). Table 1 interprets a list of key Chinese concepts into English, while Table 2 provides interpretations of certain key Anglo-American concepts in Chinese. Specifically, there are three columns in each table. The first column lists original concepts in Chinese or English. The second column gives their equivalent, approximate or nearest overlap in the other political culture. The third column then discusses issues of ‘fit’ and degree of overlap between the first and second columns.

Concluding remarks: implications for further comparison

Understanding key concepts in the two approaches and building a lexical bridge between Chinese and English can be crucial to identifying the corresponding positions from which to observe and compare. This comparison of concepts reveals certain fundamental cultural and philosophical differences between the Chinese and Anglo-American approaches in relation to the public good of higher education, such as their different world views and state/society/university assemblages. These differences underline the need for researchers to stay cautious about such differences underlying seemingly similar concepts and/or higher education phenomena across contexts. The comparison of concepts also provides a bridge between the two approaches for a more balanced comparison of the public good of higher education. It not only helps to tackle language challenges, but sheds light on differences and similarities concerning cultural ideas underlying higher education practices and phenomena and possible aspects that are worthwhile to be explored further. We now list four possible aspects below.

First, the varied attitudes towards the relationship between *gong/si* and public/private suggest distinct expectations of higher education’s outcomes. For example, in the collectivist Chinese context, higher education is expected to serve goods of *gong* to a larger extent than in the individualist Anglo-American context. While there is a strong focus on higher education’s contributions to individuals’ pecuniary returns in the US and UK, higher education in China is more comfortable with discussing its non-pecuniary collective outcomes (Marginson and Yang 2022). For example, in the US and UK, the public good of higher education is often understood as spillovers and externalities (McMahon 2009). The private good of higher education, such as the higher social status and better payment of higher education graduates, are more emphasised than the public good of higher education (Marginson 2018). In contrast, higher education is regarded as a public and common good and serving the public and common good in China (Tian and Liu 2019). There is also a strong commitment to serving the national welfare in Chinese higher education (Yang, Yang, and Wang 2021).

Second, the Chinese idea of having a comprehensive state *vis-à-vis* the Anglo-American idea of having a limited liberal state indicate different approaches to the organisation of higher education. For example, compared to the Anglo-American value of viewing higher education as an independent and separate sector from the state, the higher education system is an apparatus of the state in China. Not only the bulk of financial input of higher education comes from the state, but the primary mission of Chinese higher education is to serve the state (Yang, Yang, and Wang 2021). The dual-governance structure in Chinese higher education also demonstrates the comprehensive state tradition. According to Han and Xu (2019), the balance between Chinese academics' own academic pursuits and the national interests reflects their efforts in seeking for balances between individualism and collectivism. Thus simply imitating the Anglo-American approaches to higher education governance may not work well in the Chinese context.

Third, the worldview manifested in the Chinese idea of *tianxia* reflects an alternative way to discuss cross-border higher education activities to the Anglo-American way based on methodological nationalism. The 'no other' idea of *tianxia* suggests thinking of the world as an organic entity, rather than an assembly of nation-states as methodological nationalism does (Beck 2016; see more about this in Yang and Tian 2022). Rationales of higher education policies regarding student and faculty mobility and research collaboration may change correspondingly. For example, viewing the world as a whole, the global public and common good come to the fore. Higher education need to prioritise the production of global public and common goods rather than that of parochial (national) goods. Academics make global issues their major research foci; student and faculty mobility and global research collaboration become essential as they are conducive to the global public and common good; establishing a framework in the global knowledge system that embraces indigenous knowledges becomes an urgent task. More could be added.

Fourth, in addition to the above differences, there are similarities between the two political cultures indicated by the key concepts. For example, it seems that the *tianxia* idea to a certain extent parallels with the universal public, both of which argues the non-existence of 'private'. Further, goods of *gong* are closer to common goods than to public goods. As Tian and Liu (2019) claim, common goods is perhaps the nearest approximation of public goods in a traditional Chinese sense. These examples indicate possible ways to establish explanations of higher education phenomena that work in both contexts. Nevertheless, it is essential for researchers to stay cautious about the underlying cultural and philosophical differences.

In closing, we would also like to highlight the possibilities of employing the lexical-based comparison in comparative studies of higher education of additional topics and involving additional languages. A lexical-based comparison considers and reveals underpinning ideas and assumptions of higher education phenomena in different contexts. It helps to avoid privileging any context, and enhance the mutual understanding, dialogue and cooperation between higher education systems. It may further contribute to the counter-balancing of the western dominance in the global literature of higher education, and be conducive to the worldwide diversity and heterogeneity of higher education.

Notes

1. '古之欲明明德于天下者，先治其国。欲治其国者，先齐其家。欲齐其家者，先修其身。' (*The Book of Rites, Higher Learning*, 《礼记·大学》).
2. Note that the English approximations in the brackets here are provided in order to give non-Chinese speakers a sense of the meanings of the terms. There is no intention to narrow the connotations of the Chinese concepts to the meanings presented in the brackets. Detailed interpretations are provided below.
3. '薄污我私，薄澣我衣。' (*The Book of Songs*, 《诗经》).
4. '志忍私，然后能公' (Xunzi, *Ruxiao*, 《荀子·儒效》).
5. '义与利，只是个公与私。' (*Henan Chengshi's Writings*, 《河南程氏遗书》).
6. '己者，人欲之私也。礼者，天理之公也。' (*Questions and Answers on the Analects*, 《论语或问》).

7. See for example 'With clear distinction between the public and private, a narrow-minded man does not envy one of virtue'. '公私之分明, 则小人不疾贤。' (*The Book of Lord Shang*, 《商君书·修权》).
8. '上天孚佑下民。' (*The Book of History*, 《尚书·汤诰》).
9. '大道之行也, 天下为公。选贤与能, 讲信修睦; 故人不独亲其亲, 不独子其子 ... 力恶其不出於身也, 不必为己 ... 是谓大同。' (*The Book of Rites*, 《礼记·礼运》).
10. '乃命羲和, 钦若昊天, 历象日月星辰, 敬授民时。' (*The Book of History*, 《尚书·虞书·尧典》).
11. '人有恒言, 皆曰"天下国家"。天下之本在国, 国之本在家。' (*Mencius*, 《孟子·离娄上》).
12. See for example, 'All land under heaven falls within the domain of the Son of Heaven [(king)]; all those on this land are his subjects'. (溥天之下, 莫非王土; 率土之滨, 莫非王臣。). (*The Book of Songs*, 《诗经·小雅·北山》).

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ORCID

Lili Yang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1277-3791>

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