



Knowledge power or diplomacy? University alliances and the Belt and Road Initiative

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Accepted: 11 July 2023
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Abstract

The growing importance of China as a major actor in international order has generated tremendous interest among social scientists, but scholarly debates remain in their disciplinary confines. Our study connects existing international relations research on China and the Belt and Road Initiative with two concepts in higher education studies—*knowledge power* and *knowledge diplomacy*—to reveal the multi-faceted approach that China applies towards its “outward-oriented” internationalization activities in the knowledge domain. By studying two instances of university alliance-building through the Belt and Road Initiative, an empirically less examined area in both international relations and higher education studies, we demonstrate how China embraces a *knowledge diplomacy* approach in the case of the University Alliance of the Silk Road and *knowledge power* in the case of the Asian Universities Alliance. We argue that the co-existence of the two approaches points to the aim of China’s multi-faceted approach to its external relations in the knowledge domain. By combining alternative organizational structures and logics embodied in different university alliances, this approach presents a non-hegemonic attempt to normalize China’s network centrality in an interdependent world. We conclude that China’s Belt and Road Initiative university alliance-building efforts should open up a rich analytical space that encourages further exploration through a world-centered *tianxia* heuristic.

Keywords Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) · China · Knowledge · Networks · Power · *Tianxia* · University

Introduction

There is a tremendous scholarly and public interest in how China’s growing importance in the international order is manifested in various economic, political, and cultural domains. In higher education studies, this is more recently reflected in the diverse scholarly works

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addressing wide-ranging topics such as, *inter alia*, China's universities and their initiatives (Chan & Wu, 2020; Christensen & Ma, 2022; Li, 2020; Metzgar, 2015; van der Wende, 2018), the evolution and internationalization of Chinese higher education (practice, policy) (He & Wilkins, 2019; Qi, 2022; Wu, 2019a, b; Zha et al., 2019; Zheng & Kapoor, 2021), and the implications of a changing China for the higher education sector (Cabanda et al., 2019; Ge & Ho, 2022; Jain, 2021; Kirby & van der Wende, 2019; Lee et al., 2021; Mulvey, 2019; Zhang & You, 2021; Zhu & Yang, 2022). What these studies have in common is their empirical focus on the transformation of China's higher education system, and the scholarly contributions to theory development, in particular how China's growing international role invites us to revisit mainstay concepts such as "center-periphery" and internationalization.

Our study seeks to contribute to this rich research agenda by bridging debates in international relations (IR) research on China and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with two concepts in higher education studies: *knowledge power* and *knowledge diplomacy*. This exercise allows us to show the limitations of the existing mainstream debates in both fields, but it also encourages us to seek an alternative account. We find suggestions of this alternative account through our empirical examination of two cases of China's university alliance-building, which has remained under-analyzed in both IR and higher education studies. The rationale of our article is to examine two instances of university alliance-building through the BRI to see what they tell us about China's broader higher education internationalization strategy.

We believe it is necessary to examine China's university alliance-building developments and efforts through the BRI for the following reasons. First, the post-COVID pivot of China's BRI strategy has emphasized the importance of cultural exchange and interaction. As mega-infrastructure projects came under increased pressure due to various disruptions in global supply chains and investment as a result of the global pandemic, people-to-people exchange channels, such as the "Health Silk Road" and university alliances, gained additional prominence within China's BRI vision (Bruegel, 2023; Mouritz, 2020). Second, China's university alliance-building efforts through the BRI are rarely examined in the IR literature, as well as higher education studies, thus representing an empirical gap with analytical and theoretical potential. Third, our selected case studies represent distinct cases of higher education regionalism (Chou & Ravinet, 2015), specifically, higher education intra-regionalism and trans-regionalism (Chou et al., 2023), which are also less explored in the literature.

We argue that China follows a complex and flexible approach towards its external relations in the knowledge domain. Specifically, we propose that China can be seen as launching overlapping university alliances with contrasting organizational structures and logics to benefit from an increased network density and network relations that connect China and its universities with those around the world. This increased connectivity is significant because it normalizes the active role of China and Chinese higher education institutions in knowledge activities. In seeking to delineate the contours of an innovative analytical framework to explore China's university alliance-building, our study draws on and seeks to contribute to the contemporary debates on the concept of *tianxia*, which figures prominently in higher education studies as well as IR (Babones, 2020; Zhao, 2021). *Tianxia* is an "evolving and living notion" (Yang et al., 2022: 11) that entails multiple interpretations along several axes. As opposed to the strictly China-centric and hegemonic views of *tianxia* (Calahan, 2008), we subscribe to the world-centric understanding of the notion, which captures the networked and interdependent character of the higher education and knowledge sector (Yang et al., 2022). By empirically demonstrating the multiple organizational logics

prevalent in the BRI-linked university alliances, our main contribution to the *tianxia* debate highlights the coexistence of hierarchy and equality in the emergent world order characterized by overlapping forms of connectivity. This duality is mirrored in the juxtaposition of *knowledge power* and *knowledge diplomacy* concepts in higher education studies, as well as the geopolitical and developmental narratives of the BRI in the IR literature.

To present our argument, we organized the article as follows. First, we review predominant BRI narratives in the IR literature before connecting these with those on *knowledge power* and *knowledge diplomacy* concepts in higher education studies. Both concepts rely on distinct logics of organization and present very different perspectives of China's approaches and corresponding roles in the global knowledge landscape. By *knowledge power*, we see power deriving from knowledge leadership as the main motivating force driving China to launch the multiple BRI university alliances. By *knowledge diplomacy*, we elaborate on Knight's (2018, 2019) work to refer to China's intention to find solutions to global challenges as the key driving forces pushing China to engage in initiating and supporting multiple BRI university alliances. Next, we apply these concepts to study how university alliance membership, governance structures, and alliance activities are organized in the University Alliance of the Silk Road (UASR) and the Asian Universities Alliance (AUA). We find *knowledge diplomacy* to be the guiding principle in UASR and *knowledge power* in AUA. We then reflect on the implications of our findings and argue for the need to broaden the analytical landscape in higher education studies to include world-centered *tianxia* concept.

Knowledge power or knowledge diplomacy?

There is a general agreement in the IR literature that the BRI reflects the growing importance of China in an increasingly fraught international order (Benabdallah, 2018; Jones, 2019; Yafei, 2017), but there is an ongoing disagreement regarding the specific causal factors behind these developments (Blanchard, 2017; Clarke, 2018; Shang, 2019). The IR debate on China's role through the BRI is bookended by two opposing narratives: the *geopolitical* and the *developmental*. The *geopolitical* approach is multi-faceted, containing various arguments underlining a wide set of objectives. For some, the BRI is indicative of the larger westward re-orientation of China's grand strategy. In 2012, Chinese scholar Wang Si published an influential piece suggesting that as Washington rebalances to Asia, the relations between the United States and China have become increasingly contentious. Wang's vision of the "March West" suggested that China refocus its resources and efforts in Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East (Wang, 2014). A greater presence in these regions would serve China's interests well as it would avoid a direct confrontation with the United States while forging closer ties with these oft-neglected regions.

Others point to specific geopolitical interests that the BRI serves, including energy security. China's economic performance continues to hinge upon the uninterrupted supply of oil and gas. Despite persistent efforts of diversification, China still heavily relies on imported oil, the majority of which passes through the Strait of Malacca. The possibility that the Strait of Malacca can be blocked by the US Navy is a major concern (Chaziza, 2018; Lim, 2018). To increase its energy transport and supply security, Beijing undertakes various infrastructure projects along the BRI space, including a network of pipelines, railways, and economic corridors (Vinokurov & Tsukarev, 2018). It has also been suggested that the BRI generates critical security dividends for China, including an expansion of its

military presence abroad (Brown, 2018; Hoh, 2018). While the *geopolitical* narrative sees the BRI as an instrument of China's agenda to reshape the international order in its image, the *developmental* narrative, as we discuss next, portrays the BRI as an open, inclusive, and mutually beneficial platform of connectivity (Baik, 2019; Callahan, 2016; Fallon, 2015; Fasslabend, 2015).

The *developmental* narrative focuses on the economic factors as the main drivers of the BRI and highlights the developmental dividend that China offers to its partners. The underlying assumption in this narrative is that there are mutual absolute gains to be realized for both China and its partners. For instance, it is noted that China can help alleviate the substantial need for infrastructure investment in the BRI space (Asian Development Bank, 2017). China's vast foreign exchange reserves accumulated through decades of export-driven growth mean that China is well placed to help inject much-needed capital into developing countries. This would serve China's interests as well to the extent that it would relieve the pressures of domestic capital overaccumulation (Shen, 2018; Sum, 2018; Zhang, 2017).

The idea that the BRI offers a path to shared and inclusive development for all partners hinges on the notion of connectivity. According to the official discourse, the BRI aims to "promote the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas, establish and strengthen partnerships among the countries along the Belt and Road, set up all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks, and realize diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2015). Seen as a path to development via enhanced connectivity, the BRI is portrayed as consistent with the core values of a global economy (Bijian, 2017; Liu & Dunford, 2016). Given the rising tides of protectionism around the world, many have underlined that China will play an important role in facilitating an open economic order (Li & Taube, 2018). In contrast to neoliberal globalization which has delivered economic dividends unequally, the BRI is portrayed as the path to an inclusive global economic governance.

Setting aside that the IR literature on China's international role through the BRI rarely focuses on issues in the knowledge domain, we argue that it usefully presents us with two alternative views for understanding China's approach to its external relations. First, those who read China's role through the geopolitical lens see it as a *vertical* relationship, where China uses the BRI to actively cultivate various forms of asymmetrical relationships with partners who would potentially accept China's leadership role. Here, it is important to highlight the time dimension in these developments: While China may not be a leader today, through these working relationships, it may become a leader tomorrow or later. Unclear or failure to produce visible leadership results should not be taken to mean that China has not been successful; rather, the emphasis should be placed on assessing continuous and diverse investment, as it signals China's willingness to play the long game. For our purposes, strategies towards enacting and cultivating this style of relationship can be found in China's "outward-oriented" higher education internationalization activities.

China's higher education internationalization activities have emerged and evolved over time (cf., Yang, 2014; Lin, 2019; Lo & Pan, 2021; Li & Xue, 2022). Wu (2019a: 81–82) categorized these activities as either "inward-oriented," which refer to "the process of learning from foreign knowledge, culture, higher education models, and norms," or "outward-oriented," which seek to strike a more balanced approach. According to Wu (2019a: 82), there are three dimensions to China's "outward-oriented" higher education internationalization strategy, specifically, "(1) the Confucius Institute (CI) program as a cultural diplomacy program based on Sino-foreign higher education collaboration, (2) international

aid in higher education towards development and (3) international student recruitment at the higher education level initiated largely by the government” (cf., Wu, 2019b; He & Wilkins, 2019; Metzgar, 2015; Yang, 2010).

At the heart of these “outward-oriented” higher education internationalization activities is the notion of power. Here, we understand power to signal influence over partners and participants in view of recognizing China’s leadership role or potential. In these instances, Chinese knowledge institutions, higher education programs, and curricula know-how, money, and more are used to enhance its power and standing on the global stage. Young and Ravinet (2022: 2), looking at the case of Europe, argued for embracing the notion of *knowledge power* to describe the “capacity to act in global affairs that allows an actor to affect both relationships and contexts of global governance by mobilizing knowledge.” They define knowledge broadly to “refer to scientific and technological knowledge [...] [and] tacit knowledge that is inextricably linked to the coincident processes of discovery, dissemination, innovation and application” (Young & Ravinet, 2022: 2). In China’s case, we propose that the concept of *knowledge power* represents the geopolitical viewpoint in IR’s BRI literature. This concept can be used to refer to China-initiated developments to generate power through knowledge leadership.

The second perspective concerning China’s international role through the BRI can be found in arguments promoting the developmental view. Here, the relationship between China and its partners is seen as essentially *horizontal*, as coequals. Through the BRI, China leads a shared march towards common development, or “shared future of mankind” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2018). The developmental narrative in the IR literature can be said to have a conceptual affinity with Knight’s (2018, 2019) *knowledge diplomacy* arguments in higher education studies. Specifically, Knight (2018: 8) defines knowledge diplomacy as focusing on “the role of international higher education and research in building and strengthening relations between and among countries.” While this may appear as a definition of “cultural diplomacy” and “soft power,” Knight (2018: 8) rejects this view and argues that the emphasis is on the “two-way reciprocal process” and “inclusive approach.” What conceptually differentiates *knowledge diplomacy* from *knowledge power* is thus the former’s focus on solving “pressing global issues facing our planet” through cooperation between multiple nations (Knight, 2018: 8). Moreover, those championing a *knowledge diplomacy* perspective would reject the notion that diplomacy in the knowledge domain is necessarily about “the production of knowledge” (Knight, 2018: 8). According to this viewpoint, should China one day become a knowledge leader, it is merely a by-product of its efforts to jointly work with coequal partners in solving the world’s grand challenges.

The differences between the concepts of *knowledge power* and *knowledge diplomacy* may appear subtle and their empirical applications suggest possible challenges. Indeed, these two concepts overlap in how knowledge plays a significant role in the ways actors pursue their respective objectives. From a research design viewpoint, it is not obvious how we could go about empirically distinguishing whether an actor is pursuing an approach informed by *knowledge power* or by *knowledge diplomacy*. For example, in the case of China, if we observe that it has been recognized as a knowledge leader, do we attribute this outcome to strategic design, as those favoring the *knowledge power* view would argue, or to unintended consequences resulting from being an inclusive partner, as those promoting the *knowledge diplomacy* perspective would have us believe? We argue that one practical empirical approach is to focus on how knowledge cooperation is organized. As public administration scholars and policy scientists have argued, how organizations are designed and which policy instruments are selected reveal the intended relationship between design and effect (Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007; Shafritz et al., 2016). Put simply, how cooperation is organized matters.

Research design

University-to-university cooperation has historically been a core feature of the international knowledge landscape (Gunn, 2020; Maassen et al., 2022), but this development has gained tremendous pace through higher education internationalization activities since the turn of this millennium. Cooperation has taken place at the bilateral or multilateral levels, with universities within the same geographical region or beyond, be state sponsored or institutionally driven, and on a variety of activities. China is a comparative newcomer to contemporary university alliance-building, but it has spearheaded some of the newest alliances through the BRI. Feng and Gao (2020: 104, 109–111) identified 20 university consortia along the New Silk Road emerging across three developmental phases (before 2000, 2001–2010, and after 2011), with the latest phase seeing growth of Chinese member universities.

We observed at least seven university consortia after BRI's formal launch in 2013: three in 2015 (University Alliance of the Silk Road, Belt and Road Initiative University Alliance, and the University Alliance of Belt and Road Deans), Asian Universities Alliance in 2016/2017, Alliance of Belt and Road Business Schools in August 2017, and two in 2018 (International Alliance of the Belt and Road Engineering Education, and the Alliance of Belt and Road Environmental Deans). The proliferation of China-led university alliances goes hand-in-hand with the BRI objective of inter-regional connectivity, and they offer empirical grounds to examine China's approaches in the knowledge domain.

Our research design is an exploratory case study of two university alliances established under the BRI: the University Alliance of the Silk Road, and the Asian Universities Alliance. In May 2015, Xi'an Jiaotong University led the launch of the University Alliance of the Silk Road to improve communication and collaboration among the universities situated along the Silk Road Regions (UASR, [n.d.a](#)). Established as a non-governmental, non-profit, and international cooperation platform for higher education institutions, the UASR intends to provide a space for member universities to exchange ideas and become partners on various projects, while also linking members and non-members for collaborative discussions. More than 165 universities are UASR member institutions, and 19 universities are observers, representing more than 38 countries around the world (UASR, [n.d.b](#), [n.d.c](#)). UASR members include many types of higher education institutions, from those offering focused training (such as in pharmacy in the case of Tashkent Pharmaceutical Institute, Uzbekistan) to more comprehensive research universities (e.g., University of Liverpool, UK). The diversity of institutions is a defining feature of the UASR.

Less than a year later in March 2016 at the Boao Forum for Asia, Tsinghua University took the lead to launch the Asian Universities Alliance (He, 2016), which was formally established in April 2017 (AUA, 2019). The Boao Forum for Asia is a high-level annual forum for heads of state and government of 28 Asian countries to meet and discuss economic integration; often, its importance is in agenda-setting. The AUA was created to improve the accessibility of education resources among the alliance members; it aimed to foster an ecosystem for innovative collaboration to address regional and global challenges. As of May 2023, AUA membership remains unchanged—15 universities—and includes well-known comprehensive research universities in Asia: Chulalongkorn University, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, King Saud University, National University of Singapore, Nazarbayev University, Peking University, Seoul National University, Tsinghua University, United Arab Emirates

University, Universitas Indonesia, Universiti Malaya, University of Colombo, The University of Tokyo, and University of Yangon (AUA, [n.d.a](#)).

We chose UASR and the AUA for the following reasons. To start, we eliminated the University Alliance of Belt and Road Deans as a case because no publicly accessible information is available about their activities, which Feng and Gao (2020: 104) confirmed. We applied the same elimination strategy to the Belt and Road Initiative University Alliance since the only reference we found was a public statement on Lanzhou University's (a founding member) website. Next, we grouped the remaining cases according to their main features. We found UASR and AUA to be more multipurpose and less disciplinary driven like the Alliance of Belt and Road Business Schools, the International Alliance of the Belt and Road Engineering Education, and the Alliance of Belt and Road Environmental Deans. In terms of their activities, both the UASR and AUA also involve a greater range of institutional actors—e.g., institutional leaders, faculty, students, and staff—from partner universities in comparison to other alliances. What convinced us to focus on the UASR and the AUA is the presence of more publicly available data in comparison to the other university alliances.

We adopt an abductive approach in our research process. In the first instance, following an inductive perspective, we address the basic question: What does the case of university alliance-building in the BRI context tell us about which concept (*knowledge power* vs. *knowledge diplomacy*) is more applicable to accounting for China's role in the global knowledge stage? Using publicly available data (policy documents, media reports, published studies), we delineate the organizational features of UASR and the AUA: their membership and criteria for joining, governance and network structures, and alliance activities. These basic organizational characteristics provide the substance to compare and contrast these two cases to see whether the *knowledge power* concept or the *knowledge diplomacy* concept captures the developments in discussion. How alliances are organized matters in how they operationalize in practice. Organizational features such as the nature of the alliance (e.g., open vs. closed) are telling as they indicate whether China is striving towards becoming a knowledge leader, or merely seeking collaboration with partners to solve grand challenges.

Comparing UASR and the AUA: similar, but different university alliances

Comparing the UASR and AUA in terms of their membership, governance and network structures, and alliance activities revealed not only differences but also many similarities (see Table 1). Through the BRI, Chinese universities led the launch of both alliances to facilitate exchange (of students, staff, faculty, and institutional leaders), research collaboration, and strategy and policy developments between member universities (UASR, [n.d.d](#): Articles 14, 15, 17, 2020: 17–22; AUA, [n.d.e](#), 2019: 12–29, 34–36). The overall governance structures are similar, with an executive body, consisting of a lead and at least one supporting lead, overseeing various decision-making processes concerning alliance expansion and activities (AUA, [n.d.d](#); UASR, [n.d.d](#), [n.d.f](#), 2020). The founding Chinese universities—Xi'an Jiaotong University and Tsinghua University—are the permanent secretariats for their respective alliances. We also found that participant universities collaborate in other institutional frameworks and university networks, as well as bilaterally with each other. For instance, in UASR's case, members collaborate within the frameworks of the

Table 1 Comparing University Alliance of the Silk Road (UASR) and Asian Universities Alliance (AUA)

	UASR	AUA
Date of establishment	2015	2017
Members*		
Full members	165 universities	15 universities
Observers	19 universities	0
Representation	38 countries	13 countries
Geographical coverage	Africa, Australasia, Asia, Europe, Middle East	Asia (East, Central, South, SE)
Membership criteria	Institutions offering bachelor/higher education degrees	Leading institutions in Asia embracing AUA's mission and seek to address regional and global issues
Application process		Limit: no more than 2 institutions per country
Governance structure	UASR membership application (2 pages, available online)	Nominated by a member institution
Executive		
Permanent secretariat	Executive Council (founding universities contributing significantly)	Board (all chief executives of member institutions)
Alliance activities	Xi'an Jiaotong University	Tsinghua University
Exchange	Inter-university, talent nurturing, cultural	Student mobility, university administrators
Research collaboration	Sub-alliances on specialized topics	AUA Scholars Award Program, Academic Conferences, Joint Research Program (funding)
Strategy and policy	Annual presidents' forums	Annual summits

Source: authors' compilation based on UASR and AUA websites and publications

International Association of Universities (IAU) and the Association of Arab Universities (AARU). Similarly, in AUA's case, participant universities cooperate with each other in the ASEAN University Network (AUN) and in the Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU).

There are, however, more differences than similarities between the two university alliances. We see these differences as revealing of China's differentiated approaches towards "outward-oriented" higher education internationalization strategy, which we discuss in the next section. To start, the geographical reach suggests that the UASR is nearly a global alliance, including university members from the United States, Europe, Russia, Ukraine, Middle East, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand (UASR, [n.d.a](#)). By contrast, as its name states, the AUA limits its membership to universities located in Asia (AUA, [n.d.a](#)). These features are also visible in the scale of student exchanges. For instance, the UASR summer schools and camps have between 150 and 237 students representing 14–18 universities (UASR, 2020: 17–22). In the case of AUA, its Youth Forums, Deep Dive Programs, and Overseas Study Programs have participants in the double digits: 11–40 students representing 6–14 universities participating (AUA, 2019: 12–29). We found that the types of institutions are also very different for the two alliances: AUA members are flagship research universities in their countries, and UASR members represent a diverse range of institutions, from specialized universities to comprehensive research universities.

The membership criteria are revealing of the general openness of the UASR and AUA's exclusivity, as well as the expansion limitation of the latter. For UASR, any institutions offering "bachelor degree or higher degree education" are eligible (UASR, [n.d.d](#): Article 5). The UASR membership application (two pages) is available online (UASR, [n.d.e](#)), and the information requested is straightforward and is generally accessible on existing university websites. Beyond the basic details about the applicant institution (e.g., name, address, website, logo, institutional classification, degrees awarded, and legal representative), the application asks the prospective member to provide a self-introduction of 300–500 words and to indicate the fields of cooperation in which the applicant institution intends to engage.

Membership in AUA is highly selective. Five distinct criteria are listed: (1) *geographical* (prospective member must be located in Asia); (2) *contribution intention* (applicant institution must recognize and embrace AUA's mission, and a demonstrated capacity and willingness to host future activities and events); (3) *representation* (prospective member must be a leading institution in its country or region); (4) *socially responsible* (applicant institution must seek to contribute to regional and global issues, and the advancement of mankind); and (5) *expansion limitation* (no more than two AUA member institutions per country or region) (AUA, [n.d.b](#)). A higher education institution interested in becoming an AUA member cannot apply directly. At least one existing founding institution must nominate the applicant for membership by submitting a recommendation letter to the secretariat (AUA, [n.d.c](#)).

In terms of how research collaboration is organized, we observed differences between the two alliances as well. In UASR's case, we see a "collaborative research network" or a "network of networks" approach, which is also visible in other university alliances such as the ASEAN University Network. This style of research cooperation explicitly intends to encourage universities with shared interests to initiate multilateral collaboration. According to Article 20 of UASR's Charter, members are encouraged to establish "diverse regional and specialized sub-alliances" to promote collaboration between universities on discipline-based topics and issues (UASR, [n.d.d](#)). For instance, there are eleven sub-alliances focusing on topics such as health, energy, law, advanced manufacturing, management, tourism, intellectual property, forensic medicine, and engineering (chemical, mechanical, and

aerospace) (UASR, 2020: 31–38, n.d.g). At least seven sub-alliances are led by respective Xi'an Jiaotong University schools (e.g., the School of Aerospace Engineering initiated the Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering Sub-Alliance) and include non-UASR members (e.g., National University of Singapore, University of Helsinki, and University of Bergen are members of the Silk Road Law School Alliance) (UASR, n.d.g). While the sub-alliance format promotes research collaboration, part of the sub-alliance activities also includes talent cultivation and nurturing and curriculum reforms.

By contrast, the AUA implements other forms of research collaboration, ranging from direct funding of research to supporting academic conferences. AUA promotes the Scholars Award Program as a “flagship project,” facilitating the research stays of 10–14 days for 60 faculty members in 2020–2021, 59 in 2019–2020, and 29 in 2018–2019 at partner institutions (AUA, 2019, n.d.f). Under Academic Conferences, AUA members have hosted five events since 2018 on basic research, theoretical innovation, and AI (Tsinghua University, for postgraduates); water (University of Yangon); water management and climate change (Bangkok, through the ASEAN Academic Networking in Water, Disaster Management, and Climate Change framework); mass culture communication (Peking University); and sustainable universal health care coverage (Chulalongkorn University) (AUA, n.d.g). United Arab Emirates (UAE) initiated the Joint Research Program in December 2020 to fund research between a PI from UAE University and a Co-PI from at least one AUA member university (AUA, 2020). Successful grant proposals are funded for 2 years, with a maximum budget differentiated between laboratory-based research (\$135,000) and non-laboratory research (\$68,000).

Discussion: from power and diplomacy to normalization and *tianxia*

To what extent do the concepts of *knowledge power* and *knowledge diplomacy* help us make sense of the organization of these alliances? How do these concepts account for the similarities and differences between the two networks? Proponents of the *knowledge diplomacy* concept (or the “development via connectivity” narrative concerning the BRI) would point to the mission statements of the two alliances as evidence of China’s sharing with the world. For example, the UASR embodies and promotes the “spirit of the Silk Road”: “peace and friendship, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit” (UASR, 2016). For AUA, they would find support from official statements such as the one from Qiu Yong, President of AUA and Tsinghua University, “In today’s world, working in solidarity with one another to harness the potential of technological and innovative advancements in education is essential for the achievement of AUA members’ individual and shared goals” (AUA, 2019: iv). While proponents of the *knowledge diplomacy* concept would attribute institutional similarities in the same way, they are likely to struggle to account for the differences between the two alliances.

Supporters of the *knowledge power* concept (or the “geopolitics” narrative concerning the BRI) would start with the proliferation of university alliances that Chinese institutions have led in initiating within the BRI context and refer to these developments as China attempting to remake the world in its own image (cf., d’Hooghe, 2021; Si & Lim, 2022). They are likely to identify AUA as an excellent example of how China strategically challenges the US dominance in higher education by exclusively bringing together top Asian institutions to collaborate on their own terms without external interference. At the same time, proponents of the *knowledge power* concept would be, in our view, less able

to convincingly account for the parallel existence of UASR and other university alliances launched within the BRI context. Indeed, our findings presented in the previous section revealed that those championing the *knowledge power* perception of China's BRI engagement may find the UASR to be less supportive of their perspective.

We argue that there may be a third, and more nuanced, interpretation of the university alliance-building through the BRI that reconciles the co-existence of two university alliances operating under distinct logics of organization. This interpretation starts with the simple assertion that China can be seen to be initiating (overlapping) university alliances because it benefits from an increased network density and network relationships even when China and its universities are not central to all alliance activities: the “many-to-many” principle is guiding. We then assume that China may be differentiating between the networks it contributes to initiating because China intends to pursue different objectives and types of activities within each alliance. The guiding logic here is to be organizationally diverse, rejecting the “one-size-fits-all” principle. The common thread between an open, inclusive, and participatory framework of cooperation, on the one hand, and an exclusive, hierarchical, and China-propelled network, on the other hand, is the normalization of China as an actor in global knowledge cooperation.

The “normalization through knowledge cooperation” assumption goes hand-in-hand with the development of China advancing from engaging in “inward-oriented” activities (learning from others) towards “outward-oriented” activities in the knowledge domain (Wu, 2019a, b). Normalization is significant because it would signal that China is no longer an actor in the periphery of the global knowledge landscape as the established “center-periphery” perspective would have us believe (see Marginson & Xu, 2023 for an excellent critique). Rather, the outcome of “normalization” could be China as an actor in the center that happens to be leading in various knowledge initiatives. Here, full normalization would take a physical/material form, as well as an ideational form (cf., Woo, 2022). Physically, full normalization is achieved when we observe the constant and consistent presence of Chinese higher education institutions across all network activities. Ideationally, as we discuss below, full normalization is realized when we see the prominence of a world-centered *tianxia* conception of international order across all network discourses and practices.

Our third interpretation that advances a normalization thesis points to the need to go beyond a binary interpretation of the social phenomenon (cf., volume 82, issue 4 of this journal on academic mobility, Tzanakou & Henderson, 2021). One way forward is to recognize the normative underpinnings of the *knowledge power* and *knowledge diplomacy* concepts. Like most social scientific concepts, they are ideal types given universal form as if we are meant to observe them everywhere. Moreover, we may criticize these two concepts as being rooted in North American postwar liberal internationalism (see Marginson & Yang, 2022) with its attendant normative biases. A second step would thus be to engage with non-West conceptions of the world. In higher education studies, the *tianxia* heuristic (Marginson, 2022; Yang & Tian, 2022; Yang et al., 2022) is prominent.

According to Yang et al. (2022), a *tianxia* heuristic offers multiple understandings for higher education studies. First, *tianxia* refers to “thinking through the world” and imagines the world of higher education and knowledge production as “a single networked and interdependent collective subject within a space without borders” (Yang et al., 2022: 11). Second, the *tianxia* heuristic emphasizes “connectivity” between the different elements within the higher education world; here, reference is made to *tianxia* as a familial construct—“*tianxia yijia*” (“*tianxia* as one family”) (Ibid). Third, a *tianxia* heuristic “foregrounds *he er butong*, harmony with diversity” (Ibid). Fourth, tension is recognized by a *tianxia* heuristic for higher education as participants attempt to balance “equality and hierarchy” and

“horizontal and vertical differentiation” (Ibid). Finally, a *tianxia* heuristic acknowledges the significance of active consent from participants, “nature, the environment, ecological thinking and sustainability,” and the role of rituals (Yang et al., 2022: 11–12).

Our approach to university alliances highlights the world-centric understanding of *tianxia*, as we conceive the higher education sector as one of networked connectivity and interdependence, as opposed to a space that is demarcated by centralized, separated, and sovereign nation-states. Accordingly, we also reject the hegemonic view of China’s role in the emergent world order. Yet, at the same time, our world-centric reading of *tianxia* is grounded on the co-existence of hierarchy and equality in *tianxia*, understood as a multi-faceted and open ontology of spatial governance in an interdependent world. By fleshing out various organizational logics governing the university alliances, we draw attention to the expansive and pragmatic nature of world-centered *tianxia*.

What the *tianxia* heuristic and our “normalization” thesis have in common is the recognition that the world-centered *tianxia* conception of the international order acknowledges the presence of geopolitical inequalities and the need to establish equity through relational devices (“many-to-many” connectivity). Real power is implicit in the international order and can be argued as having steered actors and institutions towards the current geoeconomic configuration. It is thus important to interrogate the normative bases of the concepts we apply to study diverse phenomena around the world and to recognize the implications of conceptual limitations.

Conclusions: moving beyond the power-diplomacy binary

In this article, we set out to show how IR debates about China’s changing role through the BRI add to higher education studies on China’s “outward-oriented” (Wu, 2019a, b) higher education internationalization activities in the knowledge domain. By mapping IR’s *geopolitical* narrative onto discussions concerning *knowledge power* concept in higher education studies, we identify how the BRI university alliances could be conceived as an instrument for China’s agenda to transform the international order in its own image. Specifically, China would emerge as the recognized leader in the knowledge domain, and influence partners towards its vision of the world. We find that the Asian Universities Alliance, with exclusive and limited membership, exhibits organizational features that endorse the *knowledge power* concept.

We offered another potential account by mapping IR’s *developmental* narrative onto debates revolving around the *knowledge diplomacy* concept in higher education studies. Here, BRI university alliances are conceived as pathways to shared inclusive development where all participating members could prosper. Should China emerge as a knowledge leader, the *knowledge diplomacy* viewpoint would argue that it was not by design; instead, it was the outcome of the open and participatory nature of the BRI university alliance-building efforts. We find that the University Alliance of the Silk Road, with an open membership policy and welcoming approach, possesses organizational characteristics that support the *knowledge diplomacy* concept.

Our findings suggest three interconnected conclusions. To start, the empirical case studies lent support to both sides of the existing debate concerning the motivating factors behind China’s active engagement with international partners in the knowledge domain. While we may conclude that this is a limitation of documentary analyses, which further

data (e.g., from surveys or interviews with stakeholders) could address, we posit that it also signals the analytical limits of the current debate as a binary construct. Indeed, our second conclusion is that it is essential to move beyond the binary perception of China as being driven by either geopolitical concerns or shared developmental interests if we want to grasp its more complex and multi-faceted approach in practice. We proposed that China's flexible approach towards its external relations in the knowledge domain reflects how China and its higher education institutions would benefit from network density that would normalize its network centrality in an interconnected world.

This leads to our third conclusion: opening up the analytical space to include world-centered *tianxia* conception of the international order is fruitful for future social scientific research, an approach that is well underway in higher education studies (Marginson, 2022; Yang & Tian, 2022; Yang et al., 2022). As China grows in prominence, it inevitably wants to be perceived as an established actor. China's vision of the world should thus be taken into consideration when debating intellectual, governance, and policy pathways inside and outside of the relevant domain.

Acknowledgements Our collaboration would not be possible without the generous support of the Fung Global Fellowship at Princeton University. Meng-Hsuan Chou acknowledges the generous funding from NTU's Provost's Chair in Public Policy and Global Affairs in making this article Open Access. We would like to thank Gao Ming and Tan Jia Yu Karen for their research assistance in the two case studies. We are grateful for the guidance and excellent comments from Professor Marginson and the two anonymous reviewers in revising the manuscript.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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