

Representations of East Asian Students in the UK Media

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While several studies have explored the ways in which Asian young people have been represented in the UK media over recent years, the majority of these have focussed on those of Indian and Pakistani descent, and often in relation to the rise of Islamophobia in the aftermath of 9/11 and the bombings in London in July 2005. To date, there have been few studies that have focussed on East Asian young people in general or East Asian students in particular, despite the increasing importance of educational migration to the UK from China and neighbouring countries, and the growing number of East Asian pupils in UK schools and colleges. To start to redress this gap, this article explores the ways in which East Asian pupils and students were represented in the UK press between 2010 and 2015. It outlines the neo-colonial and neo-liberal narrative that is constructed about East Asian education and students; demonstrates that a clear distinction is drawn between British East Asians and their non-British counterparts, reflecting the differing economic status of the two groups; and argues that the media does not always 'manufacture consent' for government policy.

Keywords: East Asian students; education; media; international students

Introduction

Students from mainland China, Hong Kong and other East Asianⁱ countries (such as Korea and Japan) occupy an increasingly important position within United Kingdom (UK) education. Despite restrictive immigration policies over recent years (which have made it significantly harder for international students to stay in the UK to work after their degree, for example), the number of students from China, in particular, has continued to grow – and British private schools, as well as higher education institutions, are increasingly reliant on the fees paid by those migrating from Asia (UKCISA, 2016). China is the largest source of international students at UK universities. In 2014-15, for example, almost a third (31.5 per cent) of all international students came from mainland China (89,540 students) with an additional 6 per cent from Hong Kong (16,215 students) (ibid.). The number of students from these two areas has grown significantly over recent years and has helped to offset decreases in the number of students from other countries such as India. Chinese students have been important in ensuring the buoyancy of courses at master's level, and in business and management in particular. Indeed, in 2012-13, 49 per cent of all Chinese students were enrolled on business/management courses (ibid.). Students from mainland China and Hong Kong now also make up a significant proportion of the pupil body at top private schools. Indeed, the number of pupils at UK private schools, whose parents lived in mainland China, increased by 20 per cent in 2014-15 (ISC, 2015). Moreover, *British East Asians* (i.e. those of British nationality, typically born in the UK) now constitute an increasingly significant proportion of the population within UK schools and colleges. Within primary schools, for example, pupils of Chinese origin were one of the groups with the largest percentage increase between 2014 and 2015 (DfE, 2015).

Nevertheless, while several studies have explored the ways in which Asian young people have been represented in the UK media over recent years, the majority of these have focussed on those of Indian and Pakistani descent, and often in relation to the rise of Islamophobia in the aftermath of 9/11 and the bombings in London in July 2005 (e.g. Dewan, 2012; Shain, 2012). To date, there have been few studies that have focussed on East Asian young people in general or East Asian *students* in particular. To begin to redress this gap, this article focuses specifically on media representations of this group – both British East Asians and their non-British counterparts. By focusing on education-related news stories, and using a largely inductive approach, it considers how both groups are constructed within media discourses. In doing so, it engages with recent debates that the media is significant, firstly, in ‘manufacturing consent’ about policy, and secondly, in the construction of policy itself. In relation to the former, Blackmore and Thorpe have argued that, since the 1990s, new right governments across the world have successfully manufactured consent for change by mobilising public opinion about education ‘in ways which support radical reform toward more conservative structures’ (2003, 577), and that this has been conducted, largely, through the popular media. Indeed, they maintain that the mass media has been particularly effective in focussing the attention of teachers, school administrators, students and parents on specific aspects of education, and determining what constitutes both an educational ‘problem’ and a desirable solution. In relation to the impact of the media on the *content* of policy, sociologists of education have contended that the media plays a significant role in symbolic control, ‘including shaping the discursive terrain in ways that create the conditions of possibility for policy, interrupting policy once produced, often actively

participating in or interrupting the “policing” of policy implementation as well as judging policies’ effects’ (Blackmore and Thorpe, 2003, 580).

Before turning to an analysis of the representations of East Asian students in the UK media, the research is first situated within the extant literature by discussing the position of this group of young people within UK society, generally, and UK education, specifically. The role of the media is discussed with respect to both.

Background

Young East Asians within UK society

In her ethnographic research, Harris (2012) has argued that, since the late 1990s, political leaders (and the popular media) have been preoccupied with the relationship between young people and issues of multiculturalism and social cohesion. Although young women and young men are often viewed as the vanguard of new forms of nation building, they are paradoxically also often seen as those most inclined to racism (ibid.). Indeed, Harris contends that ‘Youth-driven civil unrest, terrorist attacks and the visibility of large and youthful immigrant populations in global cities have become constructed as interrelated problems that call into question the sustainability of diversity and the future of the nation as we know it’ (2012, 3). Although Harris carried out her empirical research in Australia, similar arguments can be made in relation to the UK. Indeed, a dominant construction of young people of East Asian origin, in the UK as well as other Western nations, is that they are ‘torn between two cultures’, meaning that they are unable to take on, unproblematically, neither their parents’ culture nor that of

Western society. This construction has become particularly prevalent in the context of concerns about the loss of White Anglo cultural hegemony (Harris, 2012). However, academic research has documented how, often, this is a poor description of the reality of young people's lives. This work draws on notions of hyper-diversity, which highlight, not only the proliferation of difference, but also the more complex ways in which we position ourselves in relation to others (Ang, 2003; Harris, 2012). Indeed, Amin has emphasised the complexity of Asian youth identities, noting 'These are young people who have grown up in Britain routinely mixing "Eastern" and "Western" markers of identity, through language, bodily expression, music and consumer habits, who are not confused about their identities and values as cultural "hybrids", and who, partly because of racial and ethnic labelling and the rejection that comes with deprivation, have developed strong affinities based on kinship and religious ties' (2002, 965).

The role of the media is key to producing many of these racial categories (Gillborn, 2012). As Hall has argued, 'the media construct for us a definition of what race is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the "problem of race" is understood to be' (1990, 11). Moreover, van Dijk (2000) has suggested that, in contemporary society, instead of racism being enacted through legislation or physical violence, it is often played out via the popular media, through the subtle description of ostensible 'facts' about minority populations, which emphasises racial, ethnic, national and/or cultural difference and presents these in contrast to those of the White British population. The role played by the media is often recognised explicitly by young people themselves. Indeed, Dewan's respondents made specific reference to the influence of the media in fuelling stereotypes, particularly in relation to 'how the word "gang" is

meted out to Black and ethnic minority people on the basis of their colour, class and gender' (2012, 111).

Young East Asians within UK education

To some extent, research on young Asians within UK education advances similar arguments to those discussed above. Archer and Francis, for example, have developed a 'trichotomy' in which they map the discursive production of three types of pupil within UK schools: the 'ideal' pupil, who is typically constructed as male, white and middle-class; the 'pathologised' pupil, of Asian or Oriental origin; and the 'demonised' pupil, who is Black or White working-classⁱⁱ. They argue that this trichotomy 'provides a way for understanding how minority ethnic success is always-already positioned as "abnormal"/other and as potentially undesirable – a "wrong" sort of approach to learning' (2007, 67). Moreover, they suggest that it helps to explain why ethnic minority educational success may be commonly experienced as precarious and why pupils' abilities may be understood very differently according to their ethnic background (as well as their gender and social class). Research has also emphasised the way in which differences among non-White pupils in both educational participation and attainment are often ignored. Gillborn (2012) has argued that the policy focus in the UK on the 'under-achievement' of White, working-class pupils has had the effect of erasing from sight the significant inequalities that remain for Black and minority ethnic students (among Asian students, for example, Chinese and Indian students typically attain more highly than those from a Pakistani and Bangladeshi background (ibid.)).

Nevertheless, in contrast to this research that has suggested that schools are arenas in which pathologising discourses about Asian students are produced, other studies have argued that they can be important spaces for multicultural mixing. Harris, for example, has contended that while many social spaces are already 'territorialised' by particular ethnic groups, schools, colleges and universities can operate as 'neutral and destabilising zones where encounter is required and difference negotiated through shared tasks and new solidarities can be formed accordingly' (2012, 58). Similarly, Back (cited in Amin, 2002) has argued that schools and colleges can act as 'micropublics', ideal sites for coming to terms with ethnic difference, because of the necessity in such contexts of 'prosaic negotiations'. Moreover, UK further education colleges have been identified by Amin as spaces that can bring people from various ethnic backgrounds together in this way:

Here...interaction is of a prosaic nature, but these sites work as spaces of cultural displacement. Their effectiveness lies in placing people from different backgrounds in new settings where engagement with strangers in a common activity disrupts easy labelling of the stranger as enemy and initiates new attachments. (2002, 970)

This analysis of educational establishments as sites for inter-ethnic contact and dialogue is not, however, shared by all. Andersson, Sadgrove and Valentine (2012) have argued that while the social composition of university campuses can in some senses be seen as akin to the 'thrown togetherness' of urban public space (Massey, 2005), in practice, the campus offers relatively few opportunities for genuine cross-cultural encounter. Similarly, with respect to schools, Hollingworth and Mansaray (2012) have shown how even in schools in which 'ethnic mix' is celebrated, the extent of actual mixing, through friendships and other associations, between those of different ethnic (and social)

backgrounds is limited. They note that while the pupils' common focus on academic study, despite their different backgrounds, to some extent fosters a 'cosmopolitan canopy', this canopy remains structured through school processes (such as ability grouping and the academic/vocational divide), which constrain ethnic mixing.

While the literature discussed above has been concerned primarily with *British* Asian students, there has been an increasing emphasis on international students within the UK over recent years, some of which has focussed specifically on the experiences of East Asian students. The 'educational migration' of Asian families to the UK and other western countries is often pursued as a means of enhancing the status of the family, gaining permanent residency abroad and/or enhancing wellbeing (Brooks and Waters, 2011). Nevertheless, studies that have focussed explicitly on the experiences of East Asian (international) students in the UK have suggested that these are not always positive. Kim's (2011) ethnography of female students from Korea, Japan and China documents the 'banal racism' and 'unspeakable exclusion' experienced by her 60 respondents, and the ways in which, in response, they withdrew into a defensive ethno-nationalism. Similarly, Rienties, Johan and Jindal-Snape's (2016) longitudinal study of the social integration of international students in the UK has shown how East Asian students, in particular, often continue to live in separate social worlds throughout their degree programmes. Such processes are not related, necessarily, simply to the 'othering' of international students *per se*. Instead, racism and neo-colonialism seem implicated, and are played out in other national contexts, too. Indeed, Jon's study of international students within Korean higher education has shown how domestic Korean students felt themselves to have lower status than the Western European international students who studied at their university, but positioned Asian international students (particularly those

perceived to come from less developed countries as Korea) 'at a power status level below themselves' (2012, 450). Jon concludes that these patterns are underpinned by racism: Korean students identified those from Western countries with their nations, 'which are economically, politically and culturally more powerful than Korea, and disregarded those from other Asian countries, except for Japan' (2012, 450). There are also strong neo-colonial undertones in the way in which international students are represented within educational marketing materials. At the secondary school level in the UK, international students are conspicuous by their absence from websites and prospectuses, despite their often-significant numbers (Brooks and Waters, 2015). Within higher education, although marketing materials frequently officially celebrate the merits of culturally diverse communities, Sidhu argues that:

The student is imagined and constructed as an elite economic subject for whom an international education means acquiring a credential that has currency in the global economy. At the same time, an othering discourse is also at work, resurrecting an intellectually passive other who seeks tutelage from the West/North. (2006, 175)

Sidhu also explores the way in which international students (and particularly those from Asia) are represented in the UK media, concluding that, in the majority of articles, such students are constructed as either an exploited consumer or an ambitious cosmopolitan ambassador. She also suggests that universities themselves are represented as poor custodians of educational quality, interested primarily in attracting overseas fee income to offset their financial difficulties; little space is thus left, within media accounts, to explore the non-economic aspects of international education.

Nevertheless, with the exception of Sidhu's work, there is a notable dearth of studies that have explored the way in which the UK media has discursively constructed East Asian students – either within schools or higher education, or as British citizens or international migrants. Few studies have explored constructions in other national contexts, either – although Collins' (2006) research is a significant exception. Drawing on an analysis of newspaper articles published in Auckland, New Zealand, between 2000 and 2004, he argues that three dominant discourses are produced, which construct the East Asian international student as, variously, an economic object, exotic other or social problem. These discourses, Collins maintains, construct a 'spatial imaginary of the Asian student body' (2006, 228) and, because it is difficult to distinguish who is and who is not an international student, such understandings become applied to all who are young and East Asian, including permanent residents. Moreover, they reinforce 'a fixed economic, cultural and social distance between a singular, discursive "self", New Zealander, and a singular, discursive "other", Asian student' (2006, 231). Shared experiences – between different groups of international students, and international students and the wider population – are thus silenced. The current article seeks to contribute to this body of work by considering the ways in which East Asian students have been represented in the UK media over recent years.

Research methods

The aim of the research was to explore the way in which East Asian students were constructed in the UK media. A largely inductive approach was adopted to enable various facets of these constructions to be explored (e.g. how students' identities were represented, how their attainment was discussed, the extent to which their ethnicity was

foregrounded). A decision was taken to focus solely on newspaper articles. While online media have increased in importance in the UK over the past decade, newspapers remain influential, particularly in setting the news agenda. The Nexis database was used to retrieve articles which met the following criteria: of a minimum length of 500 words; published in a national or regional UK newspaper between April 2010 and April 2015; and with at least one of the search terms (see Table 1) in the headline, lead paragraphs and/or indexing. Overall, 185 articles were retrieved that met the search criteria; Table 1 shows how these were broken down. To analyse these articles, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used, combining content analysis with discursive approaches. In the first stage of the analysis (the quantitative content analysis), all documents were systematically analysed with respect to their usage of key terms, derived from the literature. In the second stage, the articles were subject to further detailed analysis, using a qualitative, inductive approach. A coding frame was developed and applied in a rigorous manner to all articles. On the basis of the quantitative analysis, three main groups of articles were delineated, focussing, respectively, on: East Asian students within Asia (62 articles); British East Asian students (a relatively small group, comprising only 22 articles); and non-British East-Asian students studying overseas (mostly in UK educational institutions) (the largest group of articles, comprising 101 in total). Dominant discourses within each of these three groups were then identified, drawing primarily on the qualitative analysis. These discourses are discussed below, for each of the three groups of articles.

East Asian students within the UK media

East Asian students in Asia

In a small number of examples (4 of the 62 articles in this group), East Asian students within Asia are used as a point of comparison with British students, to problematise attitudes and practices deemed to be prevalent within the UK. For example, an article written by a British lecturer who had taught in China, notes:

Explaining the enthusiasm of [Chinese] teenagers through Confucianism, Maoism or any other alleged cultural brainwashing does them a disservice because it is their genuine respect for knowledge that is refreshingly different from Western students' more casual attitude to learning. (*Times Higher Education Supplement*, 6 June 2013, 30)

In general, however, the majority of articles that make reference to East Asian students in Asia problematise their approaches to learning, either implicitly or explicitly (46 of the 62 articles). These tend to fall into one of three groups. The first group of articles (N=12) comprises accounts of visits to East Asian countries (typically China) by journalists, school teachers and students, or comments made by East Asian families who wish to travel to the UK for education or study for a British qualification in their home country. These articles typically construct Chinese education – both curriculum and pedagogy – in negative terms, emphasising, for example, the high pressure environment in which young people learn, the narrowness of the school curriculum, and the lack of creativity within the classroom as a result of an emphasis on rote learning. The second group of articles (N=26) focuses on the attitudes to learning of some East Asian families (again, primarily those in China), presenting them in largely negative terms, with reference to 'pushiness' in particular. The third group of articles (N=8) focuses specifically on the results in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) obtained by East Asian countries (here again the focus is mainly on

China). Interestingly, the articles in this group tend to critique the UK government's position that the UK has much to learn from Shanghai and other parts of East Asia that did particularly well in the 2012 PISA tests. Comments such as this were typical:

The news that UK pupils have failed to make the global top 20 in the OECD's PISA tests in maths, reading and science has sparked suggestions that Britain should adopt East Asian teaching and assessment models. But we don't need to look to the east for answers. East Asian pupils do indeed perform the best, but that's true wherever they are in the world. This shows the danger of cherry-picking: correlation does not equal causation. (*City AM*, 4 December 2013, 19)

Newspaper articles also suggested that the high scores obtained by Shanghai could not be seen as representative of the whole of China:

...PISA takes its participants from students who are actually at school, but secondary attendance rates in poor, rural areas of China are as low as 40 per cent and middle-school dropout rates could be as high as 25 per cent... (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 6 December 2013, 8)

This discourse raises important questions about the extent to which the media can be seen as a government ally in 'manufacturing consent' about dominant policy initiatives. Although scholars have argued that recent governments in the West have been successful in using the media to generate support for radical reform, particularly when these reforms have been conservative in nature (Blackmore and Thorpe, 2003), the data outlined above suggest that this does not hold in all contexts. Indeed, even the right wing press, which was typically supportive of the Conservative-led coalition

government that was in power in the UK at the time, ran stories along these lines. Here, media support for reform (even when arguably conservative in nature, such as the emphasis on ‘traditional’ forms of pedagogy as practised in Shanghai and elsewhere in China) appears limited by a reluctance to accept educational approaches deemed as ‘other’. Here, the autonomy of the media seems clear.

The kinds of arguments developed about East Asian students in Asia and their approaches to education, provide an important context for the newspaper articles that discuss East Asian students *within the UK*. In particular, they feed into a more general narrative about why such students would want to come to Britain to study. These themes are pursued in more depth later in this article.

British East Asian students in the UK

A small number of newspaper articles (4 of the 22 articles in this group) that focussed on British East Asians also juxtaposed their attitudes to education with those of their White British counterparts. In the extract below, for example, we see that ‘struggle’ and ‘resilience’ on the part of British East Asian students is compared (positively) to an overriding concern for ‘happiness’ on the part of ‘Scottish’ students and their families.

Those Korean and Taiwanese families wished their children to be happy but they also had burning ambition for them. In contrast, I lost count of the number of Scottish parents who placed happiness above attainment, as if the two were mutually exclusive....Too many Scottish parents and teachers are complicit with children who opt out when the going gets tough. (*The Herald*, 27 February 2014, 15)

Similarly, in this article, British Asians (here there is no distinction between those from East Asia and other parts of the continent) are lauded for appreciating the benefits of a private education, and their attitudes contrasted favourably with those of ‘Britons themselves’:

...the former head of Roedean [an elite private girls’ school] complained that, while a British private education was increasingly sought overseas, Britons themselves were unable to celebrate its success. She felt she was battling against a tide of national disapproval. However, one sector of society is increasingly a fan of private education. A new survey suggests that British Asian families are sending their children to fee-paying schools in growing numbers. (*The Sunday Times*, 21 April 2013, 10)

Here we see that, even though British Asians are being discussed in positive terms, this positive rendering tends to reinforce a view of them as ‘other’ (Van Dijk, 2000) – not least through the explicit contrast with ‘Britons themselves’ – clearly constructing them as not ‘properly British’.

Nevertheless, as in the previous section, the majority of the articles that focus on British East Asians tend to adopt a more critical tone. Two main themes emerge from these articles. Firstly, a number of articles denigrate, or at least poke fun at, the alleged ‘pushiness’ of British East Asian parents. Concern is also expressed that such pushiness has spread beyond this ethnic group, and that White British parents are now also sometimes adopting the behaviours of the ‘Tiger Mother’ (Chua, 2011). Within such newspaper articles, East Asian parenting practices are constructed as ‘other’; their difference from those of the White British population is thus essentialised. Little recognition is given to the fact that many White middle class parents have been engaged

in similarly 'pushy' pursuits, with respect to their child's schooling, for well over a decade (Ball, 2003). Secondly, some articles problematise the ethnic mix within British schools and colleges. The *Birmingham Evening Mail* for example, describes a 'bombshell report' that indicates that 'less than a third of pupils in Birmingham schools are now white, with Asian students making up almost half of the total classroom population' as a result of 'a huge influx of foreign nationals' (24 October 2013, 8). Moreover, *The Daily Telegraph* reports fears that schools will be penalised by inspection teams for being 'too White':

OFSTED [the national schools' inspection body] has been accused of 'political correctness' after downgrading a top rural primary school for effectively being too English. The education watchdog was criticised by MPs and parents yesterday following its decision to penalise Middle Rasen primary in Lincolnshire for not having enough black or Asian pupils. In their report, inspectors said the school was 'not yet outstanding' because pupils' cultural development was limited by a 'lack of first-hand experience of the diverse make up of modern British society'. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 20 November 2014, 9)

Although the article is careful to quote others in relation to claims about 'political correctness', its headline ('The school that is too white to get top marks from OFSTED') and the amount of space it devotes to those expressing concern, strongly suggest that the paper believes the concerns are well-founded (despite evidence within the article itself that the inspectors had criticised pupils' cultural development, rather than the ethnic composition of the school). Alongside concern about the nature of the particular ethnic mix, the newspaper articles also outline fears about racial tensions within UK schools, as a result of the presence of British Asians. Some of these articles

document discrimination against Asian pupils, but others discuss what they call ‘reverse racism’ and, relatedly, what they perceive to be schools’ unwillingness to tackle racism on the part of Asian students towards Whites. For example, a relatively large number of articles focussed on the case of Henry Webster, who was attacked by British Asian students at his school in 2007. These state that ‘reverse racism meant teachers allegedly turned a blind eye to Asian gangs targeting white children at school’ (*Mail on Sunday*, 20 July 2014). Here, a ‘victim discourse’ is developed in relation to White students, who are seen to be suffering at the hands of Black and minority ethnic students. As Gillborn (2012) has argued, presenting White students as victims of their ethnic minority peers and their advocates is a recurrent theme in media reports – often used to shore up the values and interests of the White population in general when they are perceived to be under attack.

Non-British Asian students in UK educational institutions

As noted above, a considerable majority of the articles (101 of the 185) were related in some way to non-British East Asian students attending UK educational institutions - either offshore provision in their country of origin or, more commonly, a school, college or university in the UK. In general, these articles adopted a very positive tone and typically focussed on the benefits to the UK, rather than to East Asian students themselves. This absence of any discussion of the motivations of and benefits to East Asian students can perhaps be explained in terms of the dominant narrative discussed above (evident in the first group of articles), which problematises approaches to learning in China and neighbouring countries, characterising it as revolving around memorisation, long hours of study and high pressure. This understanding of East Asian

education may constitute such a common trope within the UK media that it does not need to be made explicit in articles that focus more specifically on those young people who do choose to pursue a UK education. This absence is likely also to be linked to the implicit assumption that international education should be seen primarily, and perhaps exclusively, as an economic good and a profitable UK export. Indeed, the strength of the economic discourse is striking. A large majority of the articles either focus solely on the economic benefits of East Asian students studying at UK institutions and/or for UK qualifications, or foreground this aspect of their discussion. The following extract is typical:

Back in 2006, the exports of goods and services from the East Midlands to China was worth around £250 million. Now, it's £1.3 billion, and the university's deepening links with China have played an important part in fostering relationships that have made that possible. (*Nottingham Post*, 11 June 2014)

Alongside economic benefits, other advantages to the UK of educating East Asian students are outlined including 'soft power' (i.e. promoting stronger relationships between the UK and East Asian countries in the future – articulated most commonly with reference to China):

Those [Chinese students] who study here will return home imbued with a sense of British values of tolerance and liberty. In the future, as they reach leadership positions in government or business, they will look kindly on us. (*Times Higher Education Supplement*, 10 May 2012, 31)

Only a small minority of articles critique this perspective. Those that do, do so implicitly or in a very narrow way, and are found only in the right wing press. They also share with the articles above an understanding of East Asian international students in largely economic terms; what they contest is the nature of the economic impact. Thus, they stress the negative impact of East Asian students on the UK in largely economic terms – for example, by: gaining access to high level technological knowledge (via higher education) to pass on to the UK’s economic competitors; pricing UK students out of private schools; reducing the number of university places available to domestic students; and driving up house prices in areas popular with East Asian students. Only one article of the 185 critiques the economic framing of the wider discourse, arguing that ‘Rather than seeing our Chinese students primarily as a proportion of market share, what we need is the language of public good and a global harmonious society, one that sees common challenges and uses our mutual skills to address them’ (*The Yorkshire Post*, 7 April 2015).

It is notable that, unlike the articles that address British Asians discussed above, no concerns about the ‘right ethnic mix’ are made with respect to non-British East Asians studying in the UK – despite the well-documented fact that many degree courses, particularly in the areas of business, management and administration, are often dominated by students from China (UKCISA, 2016). One interpretation of this difference may be related to assumptions that are made about the two groups of students, with those migrating for education deemed more transitory, and thus unlikely to alter the ethnic composition of the UK population. It may also be the case that their construction as ‘paying customers’ for British goods (i.e. an education) absolves them from any responsibility for creating a problematic ethnic mix, and/or that ethnic mixes

are rarely perceived as problematic if they are generating income for the nation. A number of the articles discuss the competition for Asian students, particularly those from China and India which have traditionally sent large numbers to the UK. Here, again, reflecting neo-liberal discourses, the East Asian student is constructed as a valuable customer rather than a contributor to a less-than-favourable ethnic mix in UK classrooms. The competition is also typically discussed in inter-national terms, rather than in relation to rivalry between UK institutions. This again underlines the national significance of the East Asian student market within the UK, politically as well as economically, and perhaps helps to explain the media's reluctance to question the presence of East Asian students within UK educational institutions.

Discussion

As outlined earlier in the paper, extant research on the ways in which Asian young people in general have been represented in the media has often focussed on the way in which they have been positioned as 'torn between two cultures' (Poynting, 2009; Shain, 2012). However, the analysis of 185 British newspaper reports, upon which this article is based, has indicated that this kind of construction is relatively rare with respect to education-related stories. Instead, however, the dominant narrative – which threads through reports that focus on education in East Asia as well as ones that discuss the presence of East Asian pupils and students within the UK – tends to problematise the education system and processes of learning more generally in China and neighbouring countries, and draws on this (either explicitly or implicitly) to explain why significant numbers of students from East Asia choose to study British qualifications and/or attend British schools and colleges. As discussed above, a large number of newspaper articles

discuss, in a negative manner, the alleged ‘high pressure’ of the Chinese education system, the competitiveness of many East Asian parents, and the emphasis on rote learning and memorisation within East Asian schools. This emphasis on cultural difference has the effect of diverting attention away from alternative structural explanations, which may emphasise instead global power relations and, in particular, the impact of Anglo-American hegemony on patterns of educational migration and the valuing of academic knowledge (Brooks and Waters, 2011).

The dominant focus on non-British East Asians within the newspaper articles is indicative of the economic importance of this group of pupils and students to the UK, and perhaps of associated political priorities. As noted above, the majority of the articles that focus on non-British East Asians frame their discussions in largely economic terms. In general, most of these pieces adopt a very positive tone (commonly noting the income that is brought into the UK and the trading links that are established); in contrast to Collins’ (2006) research in New Zealand, there is scant evidence of incoming East Asian students being constructed as a social problem by the UK media. However, even the small number of articles that adopt a more critical perspective on East Asian students in the UK, ground their analysis in largely economic terms - arguing, for example, that it is not necessarily to the UK’s advantage to train Chinese students in cutting-edge technology when China is one of the country’s key competitors. Wider reasons for educating those from overseas (or for desisting in such practices) are rarely mentioned. The debate about international education within the UK press is thus conducted in very narrow, and primarily economic, terms. Here, there is resonance with Sidhu’s (2006) analysis of British higher education marketing materials, which argues that the identity of the international student is represented as an exploited consumer

and/or economic subject. Thus, while there are very few articles that play out the explicit racism experienced by the East Asian international students in Kim's (2012) UK-based research, there are strong neo-colonial overtones to much of the newspaper reporting. This is evidenced through the implicit construction of East Asian students as economic objects from which to derive value, and through the positioning of East Asian education as inherently problematic – in this analysis, British schools and universities provide an opportunity for East Asian students to 'escape' both a highly competitive learning culture based on rote learning and memorisation, and a pressurised familial environment.

This context has an important bearing on the ways in which 'ethnic mix' is discussed within the media articles, particularly with respect to the differences between British East Asians and non-British East Asians. Concern about achieving the 'right' ethnic mix is expressed only in relation to the former group. As noted above, the newspapers articulate this concern with respect to: the ethnic composition of schools (for example, describing a report as a 'bombshell' which notes that Asian students constitute almost half the school population in one UK city); the attitudes of 'pushy' British East Asian parents; and racial tensions within schools (sometimes related to the presence of Asian 'gangs'). Importantly, however, such concerns were not raised in relation to the ethnic mix of higher education institutions, despite the dominance of East Asian students on some courses (particularly postgraduate business/management degrees). Indeed, not a single article among the 185 discussed in a negative manner the 'ethnic mix' of students on higher education courses. In such contexts, presumably it is deemed that the economic benefit to the nation outweighs any concern about achieving the 'right' ethnic mix, and neo-liberal concerns thus take precedence. Moreover, non-

British East Asians, because of the likely-temporary nature of their stay, may appear to offer significantly less of a threat to the White British population than their British East Asian counterparts.

Thus, from the newspaper articles analysed here, there appears to be no obvious media recognition of, or support for, schools or other educational institutions acting as ‘micro-publics’ (Amin, 2002) or ‘destabilising zones’ (Harris, 2012), bringing together young people from different backgrounds and initiating new attachments across ethnic lines. However, it is also the case that the ethnic mix of schools and colleges is interpreted differently depending on the nationality of the students concerned – which, in turn, maps on to their differing economic statuses. The analysis presented above suggests that, although some media reports provide positive renderings of British East Asian students (for example, with respect to their commitment to studying and valuing of private education), they do so in terms that differentiate them from the White British population, and thus may help to essentialise difference and reinforce views of East Asian young people as ‘other’ (van Dijk, 2000). Indeed, in some cases, such positionings are made explicit – such as in *The Sunday Times* article discussed above, in which British Asians are contrasted with ‘Britons themselves’. The evidence presented in this article also suggests that this backlash against multiculturalism operates in a differentiated manner, at least as far as the media is concerned. While Collins (2006) has argued that New Zealand media reports have had a homogenising effect – by failing to differentiate between East Asian students who are New Zealand citizens/permanent residents and those who have migrated to New Zealand to pursue a higher education – the UK news media makes a clear distinction between the two comparable groups: while British East Asians are sometimes represented as contributing to a problematic

ethnic mix, no article that discusses their non-British counterparts makes any reference to ethnic mix.

Clearly an article of this nature, which focuses exclusively on media representations, is not able to say anything about the impact of such representations on those who read the newspapers or the UK population more generally. Nevertheless, as Blackmore and Thorpe (2003) have argued, while mass media/led policy discourse does not determine effects, it 'does mobilise attention to particular aspects of schools' micro-processes, by deciding what counts as an educational issue and what constitutes a desirable outcome' (p.590). In this context, it is useful to explore the degree of consonance between the discourses established by the 185 articles on East Asian students and UK education policy. As suggested above, the extent to which the articles 'manufacture consent' in relation to the government position on international education is strong: the economic rationale for this is emphasised within both local and national newspaper articles, and across papers of different political persuasions. Criticism of this approach is very limited, and couched in narrow terms, and no concerns are raised about the ensuing 'ethnic mix' (even though this is a recurrent theme in relation to the presence of British Asians in UK classrooms). Here, then, government emphasis on education as a key UK export (BIS, 2013) is reflected in clear and unambiguous terms. In contrast, however, there is much more contestation of the government's approach to education within East Asia. As discussed above, many of the articles critiqued the government's position that the UK had much to learn from pedagogy used in Shanghai and other places that performed well in the 2012 PISA tests, and opposed fact-finding trips to China by government officials and attempts to transfer particular pedagogies from East Asia to the UK. While this difference in approach to government policy may

seem, at face value, contradictory, it appears to be underpinned by a more consistent neo-colonial position, in which a British education is valued more highly than other national systems of education, and is opened up to those willing to pay, for British benefit. Thus, there is evidence of the media defining 'desirable outcomes' of education, even when they are seemingly at odds with government policy (and even when such policy has been developed by a right-leaning government).

Conclusion

This article has explored the ways in which both East Asian pupils and students were represented in the UK media between 2010 and 2015. Drawing on analysis of 185 articles, it makes a number of key contributions to extant knowledge. Firstly, it has outlined the clear neo-colonial (and neo-liberal) narrative that is constructed about East Asian education and students – which underpins an understanding of East Asian students who come to the UK to study as primarily economic objects, and also a sense that such migrants are being 'saved' from a passive system of learning in their home country. Secondly, and in contrast to comparable work conducted in New Zealand (Collins, 2006), it has demonstrated that a clear distinction is drawn within the UK press between British East Asians and their non-British counterparts – with, for example, concerns about 'ethnic mix' articulated in relation to the former group only. It seems likely that this distinction reflects the differing economic status of the two groups (with non-British East Asians paying significantly larger amounts for their UK education), and also assumptions related to their citizenship status (with non-British East Asians assumed to be only temporary residents in the UK). Thirdly, the relationship between media constructions and UK education policy has been delineated in some detail. While

press reports can be seen to be active in helping to ‘manufacture consent’ for the government’s international education policy, by constructing education as an economic good and East Asian students as important consumers, support for the government is not provided unequivocally. Indeed, the articles are generally critical of the government’s desire to learn from East Asian countries, and China in particular, in the wake of the 2012 PISA results in which the UK performed relatively poorly. Although such positioning in relation to government policy may appear inconsistent, it is underpinned by a coherent neo-colonial narrative which constructs British education as superior to that of its international competitors. From such a perspective, the export of UK education can be strongly promoted, and learning from other countries vociferously condemned.

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Table 1. Number of articles retrieved, by search criteria

Search term	East Asians in Asia	British- Asians in UK	Non-British East Asians studying abroad	Total
Asian* pupil	1	10	0	11
Asian* student	1	7	10	18
Chinese pupil	1	1	2	4
Chinese student	25	4	69	98
Hong Kong pupil	3	0	2	5
Hong Kong student	6	0	0	6
Japanese pupil	7	0	0	7
Japanese student	10	0	11	21
Korean pupil	2	0	0	2
Korean student	5	0	6	11
Taiwanese pupil	1	0	0	1
Taiwanese student	0	0	1	1
TOTAL	62	22	101	185

*Articles were included in the sample when the term 'Asian' was used to refer to a pupil or student of East Asian origin specifically, or was used in a more general sense to refer to all pupils or students of Asian origin.

ⁱ In this article, the term ‘East Asia’ is used to refer to the eastern sub-region of the continent of Asia. This is based on the classification system used by the United Nations. According to this, Eastern Asia is comprised of the following countries: China (including the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macao, and Taiwan), Korea (North and South), Japan and Mongolia.

ⁱⁱ The ‘trichotomy’ developed by Archer and Francis (2007) adopts an intersectional approach, considering the impact of class and gender, as well as ethnicity. Indeed, they argue that while the ‘ideal pupil’ is constructed as male, middle class and white, the ‘other/pathologised pupil’ is typically understood as Asian, feminine and from a ‘deserving poor’ background, and the ‘demonised pupil’ as black or white working class, from an ‘undeserving poor’ family, and displaying a hyper-masculinity or femininity.